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Unexpected Italian Sound: “Italian Tango” between Buenos Aires and Paolo Conte

Ilaria Serra

This essay will attempt to disentangle the “DNA” of the intricate music of tango in order to reveal the Italian strand of its genetic sequence, following it trans-historically and trans-continentially from its inception in Buenos Aires to its contemporary return to one of its ancestral homes, Italy. Outlining a little-studied version of “Italian sound,” in the following pages I will aim to unearth the Italian roots of tango in Argentina, which require a thorough description because they are often overlooked, by considering some textual examples. I will then follow the tango’s long branching out to Italy, through a brief treatment of the successful arrival of this music on the peninsula and through consideration of some of its most original all-Italian versions, the tangos by singer and songwriter Paolo Conte. The perspective offered here will be that of an overview covering a century of “Italian tango” and will especially privilege the connection between the tangos of Buenos Aires and those of the Asti-born Italian composer.

Prelude: The Italian Origins of Tango

It is almost impossible to discover the real origin of tango. Tango music is a mixture of styles: traditional polkas, waltzes and mazurkas; *milonga* (the folk music of the Argentinian *pampas* which itself combined Indian rhythms with the music of early Spanish colonists); the *habanera* of Cuba and the *candombe* rhythms originating in Africa. Etymologically, there are many hypotheses about the origin of the name “tango.” They range from the word for a “closed space” in African languages to *tanger* (to play an instrument, or even to perform witchcraft, in Portuguese); from the Latin *tangere* (to touch) to *tambò* or *tango*, the name of the African drum played by black slaves in Rio de La Plata; or even to the word *tango* which in Congolese *lingala* means *time*.¹ Etymological studies list the various possibilities, but they inevitably end with a resigned conclusion such as this: “Given the lack of concrete socio-historical evidence, in addition to the dynamic nature of linguistic diachronic evolution, the enigma surrounding both the social development of the tango as well as the etymology of the word itself, may be lost.”²

The impulse to trace the Italian strand in the midst of the tango’s origin may be the result of an inference (obviously Italians were among the immigrants to Argentina, and Italian last names appear en masse on the lists of tango musicians),³ or of wishful thinking, as in the case of one descendant of Italian immigrants in Argentina, the medical doctor Oscar Juan Matteucci,

¹ See Meri Franco-Lao, *Tempo di tango. La storia, lo sfondo sociale, i testi, i personaggi, la fortuna e il revival* (Rome: Bompiani, 1975), 10.

² William W. Megenney, “The River Plate ‘Tango’: Etymology and Origins,” *Afro-Hispanic Review* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 44.

³ See the broadcast of the Argentinian radio program “El Tango Cuenta Su Historia: The Italians,” narrated by Alberto Paz (September 14, 2008; online at radiodeltango.wordpress.com/tag/el-tango-cuenta-su-historia). Besides *Canzoneta*, it includes *Estrella*, *La Payanca*, *Entrerriano*, *Racing Club* and *La Morocha*.

who likes to assert: “This primitive tango had something from the *habanera*, something else from *milonga*, the echo of *candombe* and MUCH [sic] of Italian music.”⁴ He also quotes authorities such as Astor Piazzolla, who affirms, “*Sobre el tango flotan las melodías de los italianos*” (the melodies of Italians float on tango)⁵ and Horacio Ferrer: “Problems and anxieties of our cities found a translation in the tangos, with a music that was realized by Italians and sons of Italians.”⁶ Between deduction and wishful thinking, however, it is worth taking a closer look at the elements that link Italians to the origins of tango.⁷

Argentina was a land of immigration, where Italians arrived starting in the second half of the nineteenth century. The formative years for the genre, i.e. the decades between 1890 and 1920, were also the years of the greatest immigration flow from Europe and Italy in particular. Italians composed around 60% of the total immigration to Argentina before 1890, with a peak of 23,000 arrivals in 1870. The population of Buenos Aires grew from 91,395 in 1855 to 2,415,142 in 1936. In 1887, of over 433,375 inhabitants, 53% were foreign-born and 32% of those were Italian-born. The immigrants’ return rate was high (but comparatively smaller than the return rate from the harbor of New York, estimated at around 50%): between 1881 and 1910, 41.6% of Italians returned to their country from Buenos Aires. Most immigrants were single men hoping to earn their fortunes. They were unskilled laborers and agricultural workers, but somehow more literate than their fellow immigrants going to New York (65% compared to 55%).⁸ The harbor of Buenos Aires was a center of attraction for a variety of people. Sailors, gauchos, butchers from the meat factories, African ex-slaves and fishermen crowded the *conventillos* (tenement halls) with their shared bath facilities. In his radio broadcast, Alberto Paz calls these poor and congested housing structures “*colorido infierno de la pobreza*” (colorful hell of poverty). Tango music first emerged in this context, and Italians contributed to its character at several levels.

Italians were the organ grinders who first brought tango’s notes to the streets, and Italian men were among the first tango dancers. Women dancers were later additions. The idea of tango as a sensual dance born in the bordellos seems today more romantic than real, even if many tangos refer to relationships between the sexes and between prostitutes and *compadritos*: “Today’s tango was not born in the burdellos, but rather experienced one of its later stages of development there.”⁹ Tango was born to unsettled parents in these immigrant neighborhoods to:

people from all walks of life who wanted to find respite from the pressures of their hectic lives. [...] The tango had not yet reached downtown; it lingered in the suburbs, on the sidewalks, in front of the tenements where men danced accompanied by the hand-organs played by their owners, Neapolitan and Calabrese men with shiny black hair.”¹⁰

⁴ Oscar Juan Matteucci, *Los Italianos y el tango* (Pehuajó: self-printed, 1997), 29. All translations from Spanish belong to the author. I thank Victoria Vance Navarrete for her corrections and advice.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷ A recent Italian publication, Nicola De Concilio’s *Tango: testi e contesti* (Trento: Uniservice, 2011), is entirely dedicated to discovering Italian traces in the first tango lyrics.

⁸ For the data in this paragraph, see Samuel L. Baily, *Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 59.

⁹ Megenney, “The River Plate ‘Tango,’” 42.

¹⁰ “El tango no había legado aun al centro, andaba por los arrabales; cuando más se bailaba entre hombres en las veredas, frente a los conventillos, al compás de los organitos con ruedas conducidos por sus propietarios,

Tango was created from the mixed emotions of immigrants, which Italians knew all too well. The sentimentality that flows from tango melody derives from the feeling of nostalgia and longing for broken families and distant homes. One of the most beautiful definitions of tango in Argentina belongs to a famous composer and son of an Italian immigrant, Enrique Santos Discépolo: “Il tango è un pensiero triste che si balla” (“Tango is a sad thought that you can dance”).¹¹ This sadness comes from a shared sense of failure and loss. According to Rosa Ucci, the essence of tango, *la tanguedad*—or *tanghitudine*¹²—derives from such deep sense of loss: tango is “crying over the loss and playing [music] to keep from crying.”¹³

Second, Italians influenced tango rhythms with Italian melodies and instruments. In the original medley of melodies, the harmonic structure of the first tango, according to Ucci, came from Italian opera and the Neapolitan canzonetta, with a preference for melodramatic themes of love and betrayal, and a lyrical style of violin and guitar playing.¹⁴ Italian instruments were chosen by the first players of tangos before the appearance of the bandoneón, which became the tango instrument par excellence. Ucci lists instruments such as violins and guitars, pianos, and also “the accordions, harps and the clarinets played by Italian immigrants.”¹⁵ The first builders of the hand “organitos,” who played the first tangos on the streets, were the Italian entrepreneurs Rinaldi, Roncallo, Rangone, and Pascual and Miguel La Salvia.

Third, Italians appear in large numbers among the singers, composers and producers of tango. A considerable number of tango musicians bear Italian last names. Matteucci lists all Italian last names involved in tango and comes up with an alphabetical list of 231 “bandoneónistas” (from Enrique Alessio to Marcelo Zoppolo); 138 piano players (from Juan Abbondanza to César Zagnoli); 179 violin players (from Juan Abatte to Orestes Zungri); 154 among viola, cello, double bass, guitar, flute and clarinet, and drum players; 57 poets and lyricists (from Santiago Adamini to César Vedani); and 55 singers (from Felix Aldao to Linda Thelma Spinelli). Often, pseudonyms mask Italian names, such as Jullian Centeya for Amletto (sic) Vergiati, Hugo del Carril for Pietro Fontana and Roberto Chanel for Alfredo Mazzucchi.¹⁶ As for Ucci, she asserts that the list could continue forever, and that at one time among tango fans it was easy to hear that ‘tango had become an all-Italian business.’¹⁷

napolitanos y calabreses de melena renegrida y lustrosa.” Cesar Viale’s *Estampas de Mi Tiempo* (1945), quoted in Megenny, “The River Plate ‘Tango,’” 42.

¹¹ Many authors quote such sayings; one of them is Nicola De Concilio, *Tango: Testi e Contesti* (Trento: Uniservice, 2011), 64. All translations from Italian belong to the author.

¹² Franco-Lao, *Tempo di tango*, 199.

¹³ Rosa Ucci, *Nostalgia tradimento amore: viaggio all’interno del tango* (Chieti: Tabula Fati, 2011), 15.

¹⁴ For Ucci, at the tango’s origin, there is “an old and abandoned Neapolitan song, a French waltz, a Creole melody or a country aria” (20); “in tango music, the references to Italian popular song from different regions are clear. The Neapolitan song, with “Core ‘ngrato” and “O sole mio,” is the most representative [...] The harmonic structure is typically Italian” (91). Ucci cites as an example of the opera’s influence the title “Ridi pagliaccio” for the tango written by the poet Dante Cinyera and arranged by Alberto Cia. She also notices the influences from *Commedia dell’arte* in tango songs like “Pobre Colombina” (1927, music by Virgilio Carmona and verses by Emilio Falero) where a poor Colombina is abandoned by Pierrot; or “Soy un Arlequín” by Enrique Santos Discéolo (1929) where the main character seems happy but hides deep pain behind the mask. Matteucci ascribes some Italian influence even to the musical type of the “frottola veneziana” (19).

¹⁵ Ucci, *Nostalgia*, 19.

¹⁶ See Franco-Lao, *Tempo di tango*, 32.

¹⁷ Matteucci, *Los Italianos*, 39.

It is also true that Italians were present during the four periods into which tango development is formally divided in Argentina. The two most important orchestras for tango of the *guardia vieja* were led by two Italians: Roberto Firpo, famous pianist, was born in 1884, the son of an Italian grocer in Buenos Aires. Francisco Canaro, one of the founders of the SADAIC, the organization that protected composers, was born in San José de Mayo in Uruguay to an Italian family (his real last name was Canarozzo), in 1888. La *guardia nueva* started with Julio De Caro (a distant relative of filmmaker Vittorio De Sica: his father was Don Jose de Caro De Sica) and ended with Carlos Gardel. French-born in Toulouse, Gardel has been a sore spot for critics such as Ucci (“he is the exception that confirms the rule”)¹⁸ and De Concilio, who tries to rein him in by mentioning how well Gardel could sing the Neapolitan “Marechiaro” and how he ironically summarized the “‘common genes’ between Porteños [the people from Buenos Aires] and Neapolitans.”¹⁹ Matteucci even proposes “to start an investigation to see if perhaps ‘Gardel’ come from ‘Gardelli,’ a possible Italian ancestor.”²⁰ During *la guardia del cuarenta*, important roles were played by Juan D’Arienzo; Carlos Di Sarli, who was also an orchestra director; Alfredo de Angeli and Angel d’Agostino; Aníbal Troilo, whose Italian father played guitar and sang, and Osvaldo Pugliese. The *vanguardia* was embodied by another Italian: Astor Piazzolla. He revived tango through his new arrangement techniques in a time when the genre had fallen into disgrace following the end of the Perón Era in 1955, which had used tango as the symbol of the masses. Piazzolla’s grandparents were Italian-born (Pantaleon Piazzolla and his wife were from Trani di Puglia, while his mother’s family, Manetti, was Tuscan) and lived in Mar del Plata. He migrated with his family to New York and studied at the Salesian college S. Maria Ausiliatrice. His interest in music began at an early age, and he recalled stealing a harmonica from Macy’s. He was given a *banonéon* as a gift at seven.²¹ After returning to Argentina at eighteen, he joined the Troilo orchestra. Among Piazzolla’s works, *La Camorra* is a Neapolitan-themed, three-movement instrumental suite for tango ensemble composed in 1989.

The Italian roots of many tango composers were strong. They often learned to sing at the same time they learned Italian words from their parents. For example, singer Enzo Valentino (real name Enzo Angel María Cavenenghi), born in the province of Santa Fe in 1919 to Roman parents, thus remembered his Italian background:

Dad used to sing among the carts and the herd of horses we had on that piece of land that still lives in my memory, and, logically, it was contagious. Papa was Italian, short and chubby as I am. He was a Roman like my mother [...]. He was a good Italian. My old man worked his whole life. When he was dying, I heard him say, “How much I worked, *figlio!*” ... And that sentence: “To be brave is to have dignity and honor.”²²

¹⁸ Ucci, *Nostalgia*, 54.

¹⁹ De Concilio, *Tango*, 114.

²⁰ Matteucci, *Los Italianos*, 88.

²¹ See Astor Piazzolla and Natalio Gorin, *Astor Piazzolla. A Memoir* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 2001), 35-37.

²² Enzo Valentino, interview by Nestór Pinsón, no place, no date. Online interview at <http://www.todotango.com/Spanish/Home.aspx>.

Italians were also among the promoters of early tangos. The names of the coffee shops, meeting places of *tangueros* on Sundays, have unmistakable Italian names: Tano Nani, La Buseca, Salone Peracca, Guarda e Passa, Lago di Como, Patria e Lavoro, Fratagnola.²³ It was an Italian patron who took tango out of the lower areas of the city and brought it to high society: Antonio De Marchi, born in Pallanza in 1875, organized evenings of tango at the Palais de Glace and at the Palace Theatre in Via Corrientes in the second decade of the 1900s.²⁴ At that time, tenors such as Enrico Caruso and Tito Schipa longed to sing tango, and tango began to enjoy a higher social status. One of the first record publishers, Alfredo Amendola, was Italian-born; between 1913 and 1917, he produced the records of the Atlanta label, which are now relics of the first years of Tango. Vincenzo Buccheri (known as Bucchieri), the founder of the tango magazine *El alma que canta* (The Singing Soul) was also Italian. The magazine lasted 45 years, from 1916 to 1961, and was financially maintained by the owner of the factory where Buccheri's father worked. The magazine published poems in *lunfardo*, the language of the immigrants in the lower strata of Argentinian society, which was also featured in the first tangos.

Language is the fourth facet of Italian involvement in tango. Many Italian words contribute to composite languages like the hybrid *cocoliche*, spoken in the immigrant *barrios*, and *lunfardo*, the language of tango. *Cocoliche* referred both to the language, a mix of Italian dialects and Spanish, and to the theatrical character who spoke such a language. The *Cocoliche* character appeared in Eduardo Gutierrez's opera *Juan Moreira* in 1886, and his original aim was satirical: making fun of a worker in José Podestà's circus company, Francesco Cuccoliccio, a Calabrese who butchered Castillan. *Lunfardo* seems to derive from *Lumbardo* and refers to a jargon that used a cluster of foreign terms inserted among standard Spanish and archaic forms. This jargon was spoken among criminals and Argentinian low-lives and was a mixture of Italian dialects, especially Genoese, and imported words from French, Portuguese, Galician, Native American and African languages.²⁵ Exemplary borrowings are the word *tano* for Italian, shortened from *napoletano* (Neapolitan); *fiaca*, which meant laziness or a lazy person (from the Italian *fiacco*, "weak"); *laburar*, to work (from *laborare*); and *manyar*, to eat (from *mangiare*). Matteucci traces the roots of some lunfardo words to Italian dialects, such as *campane* for "ears" (that also referred to the thief's accomplices), *morfia* for mouth, *maggiorengo* instead of *señor*, *pivello* for child. *Lunfardo* has almost disappeared today, but its traces remain in tango lyrics. Pascual Contursi's *Mi noche triste* contains eight *lunfardo* words in forty-two verses, four of which are of Italian derivation: *amuraste* (to be abandoned) from the Sicilian *ammurrari* (a maritime word for a ship stranded on the rocks); *bulin* (bedroom) from the dialectal word *bolin*; *campanear* (to look out as a thief's accomplice); and *encurdelarse* (to become inebriated), which comes from the same verb in Genoese.²⁶

Fifth, Italians were the lyricists, or poets, of tango. The influential Pascual Contursi was the son of modest Neapolitan immigrants who owned a tailor shop called *A la ciudad de Napoles*. His father Francesco was an active member of the Italian community as a counselor for the Society of Mutual Aid. Pascual died young and mentally unstable at forty-four but not before giving tango some of its best lyrics. He is responsible for introducing the weight of sentimentality to the genre and for contributing lively descriptions that spoke of the arrogance

²³ See Franco-Lao, *Tempo di tango*, 32.

²⁴ Ucci, *Nostalgia*, 36-37.

²⁵ See De Concilio, *Tango*, 51.

²⁶ See *Ibid.*, 93.

and self-assurance of the *porteño*.²⁷ He was one of the initiators of the *deslupanarización* of tango, and his aforementioned tango, *Mi noche triste*, is strongly influenced by the Neapolitan song.²⁸ Also the lyricist Homero Manzi was the son of Italian immigrants of the first wave. He introduced into tango affectionate scenes taken from rural life and city neighborhoods. He sang the deep sense of nostalgia for places and times long gone and was the defender of marginal people, those who “seem to possess the very soul of the violin” (*Viejo ciego*, 1926). Lyricist Enrique Santos Discépolo was the son of Santo Discépolo, an Italian musician who studied at the Royal Conservatory of Naples and then migrated to Buenos Aires, where he directed bands of police and firefighters, as well as a small conservatory. Enrique Santo Discépolo’s lyrics are strong and abrasive, as in *Uno* (1943), in which he curses his pain, or the pessimistic *Yira, yira* (1930), which labels destiny as fickle and cruel as a woman (“*la suerte es grela*”). Santo Discépolo famously affirmed that tangos are “three-minute novels that successfully tell the problems of one, but which are suffered by many”²⁹—an opinion shared by Paolo Conte many decades later.

The sixth and final evidence of the involvement of Italians in tango is their presence within tango lyrics, starting in the early days. In the second decade of 1900, the song *Cattaneo*, by Francisco Peirano, was dedicated to the airplane pilot, Attilio Cattaneo, while *A Trípoli se van*, by Rómulo Pane, was dedicated to the Italians from Argentina who returned to Italy to take part in the 1911 war against Lybia. In the Thirties and Forties, many songs were dedicated to anonymous immigrants and their struggles: *el tano verdulero* rested from his work as a fruit vendor lying on the sidewalk in *Carnaval de mi barrio* by lyricist Luis Rubinstein. “*Un tano cabrero*” (a furious Italian innkeeper) railed against his non-paying customers in *Padrino pelado* by Carlos Gardel; *el tano don Giacumìn* (a Genoese with many children) lived in the *conventillo* in *Y taconeando saliò* by Modesto Papavero. *El Tano Nicola* by Luciano Bonnel paid homage to Italians who spread tango throughout Argentina with their hand-cranked *organitos*. A “divine *ragazza*” freezing in the snow of a cold “Italian sky” appeared in *Graziella* by Armando Tagini, while a “*compadre polenta*” was the ill-reputed protagonist of *Mangangá* by Cátulo Castillo. “*El pobre cocoliche* played his accordion at the shop doors” in *Carnaval de antaño* by Manuel Romero and “Don Giovanni cried with his accordion” in *Domani* by Cátulo Castillo. An “Italian was crying for his blond and far-away love while drinking good wine” in *Tinta roja* by the same Castillo, and another Italian shattered his brains with a gunshot in the grotesque *La cabeza del italiano* by Francisco Bastardi.³⁰

The five songs I will now consider in more detail—*Silbando*, *Una carta para Italia*, *Canzoneta*, *La cantina* and *Las tres banderas*—bear strong signs of Italianicity. My textual translation privileges fidelity to the images over form. As often in tango, the style of these songs is synthetic and impressionistic, and the townscape is drawn with a few brush strokes. The night, the moon, the wind, the muffled sounds become elements that acquire emotional and evocative

²⁷ See Ucci, *Nostalgia*, 100. The pain of abandonment is clear in Contursi’s *Mi noche triste* (1917), dedicated to the woman who left him: “y el espejo està empañado / se parece que ha llorado / por la ausencia de tu amor” (“even the mirror is misted up / it seems it has cried / for the absence of your love”).

²⁸ See De Concilio, *Tango*, 102. This neologism was coined by Jose Gobello in his *La deslupanarización del tango*, to speak of the refinement of tango music operated by Contursi and initiated by Juan de Dios Filiberto with the song *Caminito*. De Concilio also refers to the critical view of Ricardo Ostuni, who accused Contursi of making tango *lloron* (tearful).

²⁹ Ucci, *Nostalgia*, 146.

³⁰ The music of *La cabeza del italiano* was composed in 1924 by bandoneonist Antonio Scatasso (1886-1956) whose nickname was “el tano barullo” (the noisy Italian).

meaning. *Silbando* was composed in 1925 by José González Castillo (lyrics) and Sebastián Piana (music).³¹ This song describes a scene set in Barracas al Sud, a town in the province of Buenos Aires that once was the center of jerked beef industries and attracted many immigrants. A somber landscape is painted through a para-hypotactic accumulation of details (“and [...] and [...] and”). The focus of the song is on the description of the sweet night on the dock, as much as on the sudden appearance of a knife—a symbol of the criminal underworld. The sound of an Italian boat is present as an aural element, accompanying the night drama from far away, untouched by its violence. Betrayed lovers, criminal low-life, and the eternal consolation of music are the parents of tango who bestowed on it romantic and mysterious connotations. Its other ancestor, the milonga smiles down at its musical descendent in the last verse.³²

Silbando (1925)

Whistling

*Una calle en Barracas al Sud,
una noche de verano,
cuando el cielo es más azul
y más dulzón el canto del barco italiano...*

A street in Barracas al Sud,
a summer night,
when the sky is bluest
and the song of the Italian boat is
sweetest...

*Con su luz mortecina,
un farol en la sombra parpadea
y en un zaguán está un galán hablando con
su amor.*

With its dim light,
a lantern winks in the shade,
and in a hallway a gentleman speaks to his
love.

*Y, desde el fondo del Dock,
gimiendo en lánguido lamento,
el eco trae el acento de un monótono
acordeón,
y cruza el cielo el aullido de algún perro
vagabundo
y un reo meditabundo va silbando una
canción...*

And from the far side of the Dock,
groaning in a languid lament,
the echo brings the accent of monotonous
accordion notes,
and the sky is crossed by the howling of
some homeless dog
and a pensive vagabond goes by, whistling
a song...

*Una calle... Un farol... Ella y él...
y, llegando sigilosa,
la sombra del hombre aquel a quien lo
traicionó una vez la ingrata moza...*

A street... A lantern... She and he...
and silently, a shadow is approaching,
the shadow of the man whom the ingrateful
young lady once betrayed...

Un quejido y un grito mortal

A moan and a deadly scream,

³¹ Sebastián Piana and Cátulo Castillo, *Silbando*, Alberto Castillo, Ricardo Tanturi Y Su Orquesta, Pattaya, Mp3, 2004. Multiple versions of these tangos are available on Youtube. For *Silbando*, a complete version of the song is at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pHBAKAL-kw>.

³² The *milonga*, which originated as music and song in the folkloric tradition (as later practiced by Atahualpa Yupanqui) in the eighteenth century, is counted as one of the musical traditions in tango’s gestational period. It later re-entered the tango scene with the *milongas* written by Homero Manzi in the Thirties (for example, *Milonga triste*, 1937).

*y, brillando entre la sombra,
el relumbrón con que un facón da su tajo
fatal...*

and shining in the shadow
the flash of the fatal hack of a knife

*Y desde el fondo del Dock...
y, al son que el fuelle rezonga
y en el eco se prolonga,
el alma de la milonga va cantando su
emoción.*

And from the far side of the Dock...
And, in the sound the accordion bellows
moan
And that persists in its echo,
The soul of the *milonga* continues to sing
its emotions.

A typical immigrant object, the letter sent home, is the protagonist of *Una carta para Italia* (1948, words by Reinaldo Yiso, music by Enrique Francini and Armando Pontier).³³ Written during the regime of Juan Perón, this tango can be seen as a glorification of that time's economic spurt and a tribute to the regime. The immigrant letters, which in reality often contained half-truths written to the family, become the tear-jerking occasion for words of longing and nostalgia. This sentimental tango presents the saddest stereotypical figures of immigration: a lonely mother, a forsaken lover called Rosina, and a father whom the son could not see before his death. It is Italian music that "baptizes" the song, as the musical introduction is assigned to the melody, famous among immigrants, of the Neapolitan song *Santa Lucia*. Italian folk songs are directly quoted elsewhere: in the tango *La Violeta* by Olivari and Castillo (1929), Domingo Polenta sings "La violeta, la va, la va"; "C'era una volta un piccolo naviglio," a nursery rhyme, is instead the inspiration for the much more dramatic immigrant saga of *El piccolo navío* by Caruso and Riccardi (1924). With a poetic touch, *Una carta para Italia* describes the two lands as living beings: on one side, Italy, who is tired of suffering; on the other side, Argentina, whose fields entertain a conversation with its endless skies.

Una carta para Italia (1948)

A Letter to Italy

*Dos días hace mama que estoy en la
Argentina
no me parece cierto sentirme tan feliz.*

Mother, I've been in Argentina for two days, and I can't believe I am feeling so happy.

*Si vieras Buenos Aires, que linda
y que distinta a nuestra pobre Italia,
cansada de sufrir.*

If you could see Buenos Aires, how beautiful and how different from our poor Italy, which is so tired of suffering.

*Quisiera en esta carta,
decirte muchas cosas:
que en este suelo amigo, dan ganas de
vivir,
que acá soy otro hombre,*

I would like to tell you
many things in this letter:
that in this friendly land, one feels like
living,
that here I am another man,

³³ Enrique Francini and Armando Pontier, *Una carta para Italia*, Oscar Alonso, RGS Music / Fogòn, Mp3, 2006. A version sung by Roberto Rufino may be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pHBAKAL-kw>.

*que sueño a toda hora con el día que pueda
sentirte junto a mi.*

that I always dream of the day we will be
together again.

*Decile a la Rossina
que siempre pienso en ella, que yo acá en
la Argentina trabajo por los dos,
que cuando estemos juntos aquí nos
casaremos y juntos le daremos las gracias
al Señor.*

Tell Rossina
that I always think of her,
that I work for the two of us in Argentina;
that when we are together here, we will get
married, and together we will thank the
Lord.

*No importa el sacrificio que has hecho por
tu hijo para que en esta tierra se forme un
porvenir.*

The sacrifice you made so that your son
can have a future in this land does not
matter.

*Besando tu retrato, yo siempre te lo digo
tendrás tu recompensa,
aquí serás feliz.*

Kissing your portrait, I always say to you:
you'll have your reward,
you will be happy here.

*Aquí donde los campos conversan con el
cielo
levantaré algún día el nido de mi afán,
aquí donde encontramos un bendecido suelo
que nos dará de sobra felicidad y paz.*

Here, where the fields speak to the sky,

I will build one day a nest for my
eagerness, here where we find a blessed
soil that will give us happiness and peace
beyond measure.

*Y pienso en nuestro pueblo que se quedó
deshecho por culpa de la guerra,
y tengo que llorar
por ti por la Rossina y por el hombre
bueno al que no le pudimos decir
“¡Adiós, papá!”*

And I think of our village that was
destroyed by the war,
and I want to cry for you, for Rossina and
for that good man
to whom we could not say
“Farewell Father!”

Canzoneta was written in 1951 by Enrique Lary, with music composed by a woman, Erma Suárez.³⁴ It speaks of the aging immigrant who sees his dreams shattered, a common protagonist of tangos, as we see also in the aptly named tango, *Náufrago* (Pintos-Rubinstein, 1954): “nothing remaining of his life / beyond his memories / and his old accordion / how slowly death is coming.” The old immigrant of *Canzoneta* drowns in alcohol and cries over the disappearance of his past, of his friend Gennaro and even of the old Buenos Aires. The city of tango is represented by La Boca, the immigrant downtown area, and by Vuelta de Rocha, a historic part of the harbor. Again, an Italian song—the famous *O sole mio*—appears as a sub-text to confer its blessing on the tango, while an Italian player with his accordion accompanies the events. The mention of *O sole mio* (also melodically evoked) and the Italian exclamation

³⁴ Enrique Lary, *Canzoneta*, Juan D'Arienzo, Magenta, Mp3, 2004. Also sung by Juan D'Arienzo, this tango can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIDA04IfnPA>.

“mamma mia” lend notes of pure Italianicity. However, the poetic pathos here is all concentrated in the melancholic failure of the immigrant dream, which colors the song gray with a feeling of absence and loss (also in *Náufrago* the harbor is “crying in gray” when the Italian ship arrives carrying its music). The city of Taranto appears as an icon of nostalgia. Glimpses of Italy are often present in other tango songs, such as in *Aquella cantina de la ribera* (Gonzalez Castillo, 1926), where the memories of “the wine of Capri and the sun of Sorrento” revive in the girl’s Italian songs (“when the *ragazzina* sings, / she stirs the soul of the tavern / like dark sea waters”). To Naples is instead dedicated the nostalgia of a less-known tango, *Napoles de mi amor* by Gilardoni and Gallucci: “beloved land, you can’t imagine / how many times I think of you.” And the memory of this city haunts the *Cancion del emigrante*: “Sol de Nàpoles [...] lontano, / Mare azurro [...] sueño verte” (“Sun of Naples [...] far, / Blue sea [...] I dream of seeing you again”).

Canzoneta (1951)

Little Song

*La Boca, Callejón, Vuelta de Rocha
Bodegón, Genaro y su acordeón.*

La Boca, an alley, Vuelta de Rocha
A tavern, Gennaro and his accordion.

*Canzoneta, gris de ausencia,
cruel malón de penas viejas
escondidas en las sombras del figón.*

Little song, gray with absence
cruel attack of old sorrows
hidden by the shadows of a cheap
restaurant

*Dolor de vida. ¡Oh mamma mia!
Tengo blanca la cabeza,
y yo siempre en esta mesa
aferrado a la tristeza del alcohol.*

The pain of life, oh mamma mia!
My head has turned white, and I am always
at this table tied to alcohol’s gloom.

*Cuando escucho “Oh sole mio”
“senza mamma e senza amore,”
siento un frío acá en el cuore,
que me llena de ansiedad...*

When I listen to *O Sole mio*,
“without mother, without love,”
I feel a chill in my heart
that fills me with anxiety.

*Será el alma de mi mamma,
que dejé cuando era niño.
¡Llora, llora, Oh sole mio;
yo también quiero llorar!*

Perhaps it is the soul of my mother
whom I left when I was little.
Cry, cry, O sole mio,
I too want to cry

*La Boca
¡De mi ropa, qué me importa
si me mancho con las copas
que derramo en mi frenético temblor!*

La Boca
What do I care about my clothes
if I stain them with each glass
that I spill in my frenetic tremor!

*Soñé a Tarento en mil regresos,
pero sigo aquí, en la Boca,
donde lloro mis congojas*

I had a thousand dreams of returning to
Taranto but I’m still here, in La Boca
where I cry my sorrows

*con el alma triste, rota,
sin perdón*

with a sad and broken soul,
without forgiveness

La cantina, written and composed in 1954 by Annibal Troilo, is a tango set in a wine tavern by the river Riachuelo, which cuts through Buenos Aires in the direction of the ocean.³⁵ La Vuelta de Rocha is the curve formed by the river, and the immigrant neighborhood of La Boca is located at its outlet (the river's mouth). In an intensely poetical exchange, the singer speaks to the swallows, the *golondrinas*, but he also hints at the immigrants themselves. *Golondrinas* was the nickname of Italian immigrants who planned to stay for short periods, like swallows, and return home as soon as they had earned some money. This swallow—or is it perhaps the sound of a *tarantella*?—is curiously personified as it holds a glass of wine and fear. The *tarantella* and the Italian player with his accordion are present here again to witness the sadness of the immigrant. Music will triumph, but it will not erase the scene's sorrow and grief. The poetic level of this song intensifies as it makes large use of oxymoron and antithesis, hyperbole and personification, such as the sweet salty sky, the tearful tavern, the hand that becomes a butterfly, and the gray-suited memory. We find here the same theme—masculine failure poured over the tables in a bar—and the same poetical verve—impressionistic verses and associative technique—that would soon resurface in the tangos of Paolo Conte.

La cantina (1954)

The Tavern

*Ha plateado la luna el Riachuelo
y hay un barco que vuelve del mar,
como un dulce pedazo de cielo
con un viejo puñado de sal.*

The moon has bathed the Riachuelo river in silver, and there's a boat coming back from the ocean, like a sweet piece of heaven with an old fistful of salt.

*Golondrina perdida en el viento,
por qué calle remota andará,
con un vaso de alcohol y de miedo
tras el vidrio empañado de un bar.*

Swallow, lost in the wind,
By which far street will you go
with a glass of alcohol and fear,
through the steamy windows of some bar.

*La cantina llora siempre que te evoca
cuando toca, piano, piano,
su acordeón el italiano . . .*

The tavern always cries as it remembers you, while the Italian slowly plays his accordion . . .

*La cantina, que es un poco de la vida
donde estabas escondida
tras el hueco de mi mano.*

The tavern which is a bit of life
where you were hiding
behind the hollow of my hand.

*De mi mano que te llama silenciosa,
mariposa que al volar,*

My hand calls you silently,
a butterfly that upon flying,

³⁵ Annibal Troilo, *La cantina*, Annibal Troilo, O.T. with Jorge Casal, DYM Online, Mp3, 2010. A good recording of Annibal Troilo's tango is at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dhj6J0rm-kU>.

*me dejó sobre la boca, ¡sí!
su salado gusto a mar.*

left on my mouth, yes,
its salty taste of the sea.

*Se ha dormido entre jarcias la luna,
llora un tango su verso tristán,
y entre un poco de viento y espuma
llega el eco fatal de tu voz.*

The moon has fallen asleep among the
ropes, a tango cries his sad verses,
and through a little wind and foam,
the fatal echo of your voice arrives.

*Tarantela del barco italiano
la cantina se ha puesto feliz,
pero siento que llora lejano
tu recuerdo vestido de gris.*

Tarantella of the Italian boat,
the tavern has become a happy place,
but I hear it your gray-clothed memory
cry from afar.

Finally, the most patriotic song, *Las tres banderas*, written in 1958 by Carlos Antonio Russo and composed by Roberto Rufino, is a hymn to multiculturalism.³⁶ The authors must have had themselves in mind as models of successful integration, both being born of Italian immigrants. The song tells the story of the son of immigrants who is born of a mixed marriage: an Italian father and a Spanish mother who sings a Spanish song dedicated to the Calle de Alcalá, a famous street in Madrid. In a triumph of tearless assimilation, the first generation immigrant's pain is forgotten in order to make space for the new Argentinian, the son of immigrants.

Las Tres Banderas (1958)

The Three Flags

*Dejó el cielo ardiente de la bella Italia
llegó a la Argentina con una ambición:
trabajar por ella su querida Amalia,
la hermosa española que un hijo le dio.*

He left the burning sky of beautiful Italy,
he came to Argentina with one ambition,
to work for his dear Amalia
the beautiful Spanish girl who gave him a
son.

*Hoy son tres banderas bajo un mismo
cielo,
la blanca y celeste fue quien los juntó,
mientras que él dichoso canta un stornello,
ella, la española, canta esta canción:
“Por la calle de Alcalá, la florista viene y
va...”*

Three flags now under the same sky,
the white and sky-blue flag united them,
while the happy man sings a stornello,
the Spanish girl sings this song:
“The flower girl comes and goes on Alcalá
street...”

*Ahí están las tres juntas, tres banderas
reunidas en la mesa familiar...
La española, tan leal y tan sincera;
la italiana, que es pureza y es bondad...
y la otra, la bandera de mi patria,*

Here three flags are united
at the family table.
The Spanish one, so loyal and sincere,
the Italian, purity and goodness,
and the other, the flag of my country,

³⁶ Roberto Rufino, *Las tres banderas*, Osvaldo Pugliese with Jorge Maciel, DYM Online, Mp3, 2011. It is also at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrS6aNtkOtU>.

es el hijo argentino de los dos.

is the Argentinian offspring of the two.

*La bandera que es amparo del que llega
a este suelo de esperanzas y de amor.
Aquí en la Argentina formaron su nido
Soñando en la gloria de un mundo mejor...
y al besar la frente del hijo querido
cantan a este suelo que les dió calor...*

This flag is a shelter for those arriving
To this land of love and hope.
Here in Argentina they built their nest,
dreaming of the glory of a better world...
and kissing the forehead of the dear son,
they sing to this land that gave them
warmth.

“Por la calles de Alcalá...”

“In the streets of Alcalà...”

It is thus clear that Italians were present in the original tango in all its dimensions: as singers and protagonists, as musical ancestors, and as poetic inspiration. They accompanied the first decades of the life of tango, lending it their singular sensibility and local color, until tango crossed the ocean and arrived in Europe.

Intermezzo

In the second decade of the twentieth century, tango had already become an international phenomenon, reaching Paris, London and New York. It spread worldwide throughout the 1920s and 1930s, but it arrived in Italy around 1911. Here it was seen as more than just a foreign dance. It was perceived in all its revolutionary charge as a seed of renovation to change the old century’s mentality about society: “For the European it is an exotic product, of unclear origins, bearer of erotic connotations and coming from a marginal environment.”³⁷ Gian Franco Vené asserts that tango immediately became a hammer in the hands of those dancers who used it to debunk the old stuffiness. Tango lovers “wanted to transform the dance into an impudent show that showed off the charge of passion that the old morality had tried to hide in every way.”³⁸ The influential poet Gabriele D’Annunzio appreciated the novelty and declared his admiration for the very modern dances of Argentine tango. Instead, surprisingly, the Futurist movement—which seemed engaged in the same fight against the old—did not approve of the new dance. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, founder of Futurism, violently critiqued “the Parisian and Italian tangos” danced by “semi-molluscs” who personified the “wild feline quality of the Argentine race, stupidly domesticated, narcotized and dusty.”³⁹ He was joined in his diffidence by the Vatican, which demonized the dance and proposed the “furlana” as an alternative, a lively but safer dance of Friuli, which, as a result became known in satiric vignettes as the “dance of the pope.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Felipe Pullon and Enrique Camara, *El tango italiano: un espejo metafórico* (Buenos Aires: Centro Cultural Borges, 2009), 2.

³⁸ Gian Franco Vené, *La canzone italiana* (Milan: Fratelli Fabbri, 1970), 4.

³⁹ Pullon and Camara, *El tango italiano*, 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini found in tango a convenient shield against the fashion of American jazz, which was invading Italy with its “bastard” rhythms. Several famous tangos were composed in the Fascist period between Twenties and Thirties. If *Sul lago lontano* (Di Lazzaro) supported the colonialist invasion of Africa, *Il minatore* (Alberto Lao Shor) glorified the *duce*. Some of these compositions entered the collective memory of the nation, such as *Chitarra romana* (Eldo Di Lazzaro) and *Violino tzigano* (Cherubini-Bixio). Most of these tangos celebrated otherness, exoticism and distance, whether the *golondrinas* who respond to the call of the guitar in *Il tango delle capinere* (Bixio-Cherubini), or the *puszta* of Hungary in the aforementioned *Violino tzigano*. Many aspects of early Italian tangos reflected the themes of their progenitors in Rio de la Plata, by adapting them to the local reality. This is the case of the fallen woman of *Io conosco un bar* (Mascheroni), where the bar is nothing other than the reinterpretation of the Argentine café in a local light. This place, so dear to tango, assumes for some historians evocative psychological valences: the café was “seen in some tangos as a school of life and a metaphor for the maternal womb in which could be found relief from love’s disillusion.”⁴¹ The bar was a metaphor of disenchantment, situated at the periphery of the city, a refuge for sinners and a place of sexual transgression.

After the Second World War, tango music accompanied the second large wave of emigration from Italy, and a new surge of transoceanic movements between the two motherlands: Italy, mother of its immigrants, and Argentina, tango’s first home. One witness of that era was a young ship worker, Felice Chiaruzzi, who now lives in San Marino, and who, between 1952 and 1958, was embarked on several large ships (*Conte Grande*, *Giulio Cesare*, *Augustus*) as an employee in the mail room and in room service. A tango dancer himself, Felice witnessed the peak of tango passion right in its birthplace, Buenos Aires. He remembers:

After 16 days on the ship, it was a pleasure to stay a few days in Buenos Aires and visit the city. We drank Argentinian wine that tasted just like Italian wine at the restaurant “Re dei Vini.” The waiter Amilcare spoke not Italian but Genoese. He lived in La Boca, the area founded by Genoese immigrants. We would go to the large *avenidas* to the ballrooms. Each had two orchestras alternating every half hour: one just for tango and one for modern music. They were respectable places. Women were dressed with flowery dresses and long skirts. Men wore dark suits and ties. They danced beautifully. We looked on with interest and saw unfamiliar moves and precise steps. They danced it differently than in Europe, or the way my father danced it. He had migrated to France before the War and danced it with passion. We sailors asked the girls to dance (a tango invitation is never refused, age does not matter) and tried our best.⁴²

Back in Italy, starting in 1946, tango contributed to the creation of the musical genre of *liscio*, a practical dancing music for couples without exaggerated movements, which became a favorite at popular festivities and in small-town dancing rooms. Tango melded well with traditional rural and city dances such as the waltz, the mazurka and the polka. In the 1970s this fusion gave way to the phenomenon of the Casadei orchestras, and their *liscio* music. Casadei

⁴¹ Ibid., 19.

⁴² Felice Chiaruzzi, “RE: tango?” interview by Ilaria Serra via e-mail message, April 18, 2013.

was the last name of the family that inspired a new kind of musical franchise: other singers and musicians, using the accordion as their main instrument, borrowed the Casadei name in order to be clearly identified with the successful genre (Giancarlo Casadei, Celestino Casadei, Claudio Casadei, Ezio Casadei).

Today, tango in Italy has become a recreational dance. Lessons provide a meeting place for socialization but also a locus of difference in which to escape daily life. Tones of exoticism and positive otherness blend with “mysterious elements of virility, feminine beauty and sentimentality,”⁴³ and this “hybrid producer of otherness” has become an “example of a globalized postmodernity that can become an identity.”⁴⁴

Finale: Paolo Conte's Tangos

The Italian history of tango reaches its apex when this music sparks the interest of one of Italy's most original composers and performers: Paolo Conte. Conte's compositions absorb various musical influences, mainly jazz, but also boogie, rumba, Neapolitan song, swing, and tango. He was educated as a lawyer, but is considered a poet (he received the “Premio Montale per la poesia” in 1991) and an author of contemporary literature (he was bestowed the Laurea honoris causa in Modern Literature at the University of Macerata in 2003). Conte is “a pianist with a delicate and nuanced touch. His music swings between jazz and rumba. He has the slurred and slightly nasal voice of a bar pianist, romantic and funny lyrics filled with imagination, and greatly evocative and diabolic final crescendos.”⁴⁵ Tango appears in Conte's songs through its content of foreign otherness and exotic distance. Some critics even read Conte's penchant for tango as a slap in the face to those who belittled him as a provincial singer.⁴⁶ Tango, however, is not simply performed by Conte; it is appropriated, dismantled, and reworked by his “bizarre sensibility.”⁴⁷

True to its composite origins, tango becomes an instrument of hybridization in Conte's music. “Between” seems to be a key word in any critical work on the composer: he is located between styles, a “translator,” “a mediator of myths, the tropical, the American and the European,”⁴⁸ and between two worlds: that of northern Italy—where the fog hides human solitude—and a warmer one made of “a melancholic tango, shining of sea and sun.”⁴⁹ These two worlds coexist and, through their interaction, create his songs. They are synthesized in a symbolic place of Conte's own creation: the bar Mocambo. This bar at the periphery of life bears a kitschy, provincial name, with exotic pretensions, brimming with the aroma of coffee and Latin rhythms; it inspires the sadness of a newly-bought brown living room set (*tinello marron*) and the savage joy of leopard skin. Its habitu  client is a *n ufrago*, a shipwrecked life. The Mocambo

⁴³ Pullon and Camara, *El tango italiano*, 38.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁵ Amilcare Rambaldi, “Tutto il resto   Francia” in *Tutto un complesso di cose: il libro di Paolo Conte*, ed. Enrico de Angelis (Florence: Giunti, 2011), 142. All translations from Italian belong to the author.

⁴⁶ See De Angelis, *Tutto un complesso di cose*, 18.

⁴⁷ According to Michele Serra, Conte's style is the style of the bizarre: the singer had the patience to be faithful to it until the audience understood it was a real style and the expression of his interior world. For Serra, the “avvocato di Asti” seemed the perfect definition of a bizarre artist. See Michele Serra, “Lo stile della bizzarria,” in *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁹ Nicola Pasqualicchio, “Avventori e avventurieri,” in De Angelis, *Tutto un complesso di cose*, 153.

is the direct descendent of the *botegon* for lonely immigrants of Buenos Aires—the place where a man, immigrated or just adrift in life—reflects his loneliness in an empty glass.

For Conte, tango becomes the herald of a second world, one that is sufficiently far away to constantly lure him, a remote land of “Salgarian tradition,” suggesting “the exoticism of those who stand looking at improbable oceans and continents from the window. [...] Conte has a weak spot for everything far away in time and space.”⁵⁰ Tango is also a way out for many flights in Conte’s songs, where “the unsatisfied escape from daily routine, the restless escape rest, the lovers escape love”⁵¹ and “words escape from everywhere to create dizzying ellipses. [...] The musician chases the ‘green milonga’ to the ‘white lakes of silence.’”⁵² Tango joins a multiplicity of other musical genres that equally fascinate Conte for their powerful suggestions of distance: jazz and African rhythms, the music of Paris in the Twenties, swing from North America, and rumba from Latin America.

Paolo Conte quotes and composes a variety of tangos which are a compendium of the historical tango (“the Bignami of Argentinian tango,” according to De Angelis).⁵³ With one of his typical surprising combinations, Conte explains that he uses tango as “the summary of life, just like a lizard is the summary of a crocodile.”⁵⁴ Tango offers Conte several possibilities for scenes, not detailed but impressionistically drawn, which are welcome in his own style. Regarding his relationship with this musical genre, Conte affirms:

Tango is a music that tastes like destiny and farewells; even its steps mime and measure absolute movements. There are moments of distance and vicinity, moments of sufficiency and moments of ineluctability. But tango is also a universe of lights and colors, it is perhaps the most vivid music that we can imagine, it lives on shadows and flashes, on generally livid and crude lights, and it gathers in one single picture many elements, [...] jarring movements and sudden cries.”⁵⁵

Conte’s tango themes mirror those of original tango: the duel of the sexes, the cruel woman, the lonely bar, the marginal man. Stereotypical as they may be, when they fall into the hands of Conte, these types are inserted into surreal situations and unexpected associations generated by his own eccentric sensibility. Besides, these tango themes resonate with an author who is directly involved in this “constant epos” of “the prisoner or the runaway or shipwrecked man” dreaming “of a woman-infinite, a woman-sea, an algebraic and wise, welcoming muse.”⁵⁶

Linguistically, tango also makes a complete circle in Paolo Conte. If Italian words were bastardized in the *lunfardo* of the first tangos, Spanish is now used by Conte to extract further meanings for his music, in peculiar sounds evoking “passion, intimacy, and subtle seduction.”⁵⁷ In several songs, Conte creates onomatopoeias (“ci bum ci bum”) and employs foreign words

⁵⁰ De Angelis, *Tutto un complesso di cose*, 12.

⁵¹ Isabella Maria Zoppi, *Paolo Conte. Elegia di una canzone* (Città di Castello: Zona, 2006), 43.

⁵² Dorian Fournier, introduction to *Le parole di Paolo Conte* (Turin: Allemandi, 1997), 7.

⁵³ De Angelis, *Tutto un complesso di cose*, 10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Enrico De Angelis, “Intervista a Massimo Pitzianti,” in De Angelis, *Tutto un complesso di cose*, 109.

⁵⁶ De Angelis, *Tutto un complesso di cose*, 16.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

drawn from everywhere, from the English of *Don't Throw It In The W.C.* to the Piedmontese dialect of *Sijmadicandhapajiee* (literally, “we are haystack-dwelling dogs,” lonely and homeless), the Neapolitan of *Vita da sosia*, and the Hispanic-American *pastiche* of *Danson metropolis* (all songs contained in the 1995 album, *Una faccia in prestito*).⁵⁸ Conte’s lyrics are always composed after the music and are subservient to the rhythm. As Stefano La Via asserts, Conte writes music to inspire poetry, “music for poetry” and, to serve his music, he makes up a nonexistent hybrid language, almost a new *lunfardo*.⁵⁹

Conte’s first tango is simply called *Tango* (1975, album *Paolo Conte*).⁶⁰ Pumped by the rhythmic *bandoneón*, its lyrics immediately embrace the traditional iconography of the original tangos, focusing on a restaurant scene and an elegant lady who is indifferent to her older lover. Though the scene is impressionistically constructed and the listener can only guess at the relationship between the two protagonists, its bitterness is unmistakable in the lucid sadness of the old man who adores the younger female figure. Her attention has taken him off the anonymity of “tu” (as opposed to the more formal address *lei*), yet he knows this is a temporary victory and quietly accepts his defeat.

Tango

*Non c'è signora più elegante
seduta a questo ristorante
vicino a te io sono niente, è vero.
Tu polarizzi l'attenzione
tu sei il centro d'attrazione
io: un anonimo signore e basta.*

*No, no questa festa è anche per me
che ho creduto sempre in te
dal primo giorno, e ancora.
Diversamente io sarei rimasto niente più
che un passante a cui si dà, ma guarda,
a cui si dà del tu.*

*Ma a certi sguardi della gente
non sai restare indifferente
e non rinunci ad una sfida antica...*

*Sì, sei rimasta quel che eri,
una puttana, e sembra ieri
che ti ho strappata via dal marciapiedi*

Tango

There is not a more elegant woman
Sitting in this restaurant
Next to you I am nothing, it's true.
You polarize attention
You are the center of attraction.
Me: an anonymous man and nothing more.

No, this party is also for me
Who always believed in you
Since the first day, and still do.
Otherwise, I would have remained nothing
more than a simple passer-by, but look,
one you address with *tu*.

But to certain looks of people
You cannot remain indifferent
And you don't refuse the ancient
challenge...

Yes, you remain what you were
A *puttana*, and it seems just yesterday
That I took you away from these sidewalks.

⁵⁸ Paolo Conte, “Una faccia in prestito,” Paolo Conte, Warner Italy, CD, 1996.

⁵⁹ Stefano La Via, “Musica per poesia in Paolo Conte. Una rilettura di *Madeleine*,” in Centro studi Fabrizio De André, *Il suono e l'inchiostro. Cantautori, saggisti, poeti a confronto* (Milan: Chiarelettere, 2009), 171.

⁶⁰ Paolo Conte, *Tango*, Paolo Conte, RCA Record Label, MP3, 1975. Conte’s “Tango” can be found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xs_8Uujjujg.

*Eh, sì, questa festa è anche per me
che una regina ho visto in te.*

Eh, yes, this party is for me too
who saw a queen in you.

*Sarà un'innata educazione
o un'assurda dedizione
che m'impedisce di gridare al mondo
che ti ho inseguita ed adorata
di devozione illuminata
come soltanto lo sa fare un vecchio.*

Perhaps it's my innate good manners
Or an absurd form of dedication
That prevents me from screaming to the
world that I pursued you and adored you
With the enlightened devotion
That only an old man can give.

No, no questa festa è tutta tua.

No, no, this party is all yours.

*Diversamente
a me non resta che un sorriso
molto ingenuo,
paradiso,
cara
ragazza.*

On the other hand,
only a very naïve smile
is what I have left,
Paradise
Dear
Girl.

Tango's pronominal contraposition between “*io*” and “*tu*” linguistically translates into a love relationship the distance evoked by the music, a tango from a distant place and long ago. On the one side “*you*,” the elegant but self-absorbed woman; on the other “*me*,” a man who is “naïve and elegant as a country villager (*paesano*) dressed for an important occasion.”⁶¹ This opposition expressed in deictics (the pronouns *me-you*) reflects the topodeictic opposition (here, there) that we find in other tangos by Conte, such as *Alle prese con una verde milonga*. The same opposition can be related to the desire for an elsewhere and the recognition of its distance, as Paolo Zublena notes in his discussion of the contraposition of personal relationships (pronouns) and the recurrence of a non-specified elsewhere (topodeictics such as *here, there, this* and *that*) in Conte's lyrics. For Zublena, this contrast speaks of incommunicability between people and between places, and especially between the singer's inner space and an outer reality: *here* is the intrapersonal space, and *there* is the place of his inner world. “*Laggiù*” is the “beloved [...] place of alterity, where the exotic sense of a geographic elsewhere is fused with an existential disorientation.”⁶²

In 1980, Conte writes *Blue tangos* (album *Un gelato al limon*) in which the mood darkens and departs from tradition.⁶³ Tango is here only a musical shadow, and the “dark rhythm of a dance” provides introduction to a song of disillusionment, of *poets maudits* living a “scoundrel life” (*vita mascalzona*), wasting their days in the city of Paris, among women and “the green shadows of a bay window,” sipping tamarind water (the rhyming assonance *bovindo-tamarindo* is one of the most unusual and recherché in Italian poetry). Here too the weight of traditional tangos is heavy with their conventional suggestion of wasted and melancholic lives.

⁶¹ Mario Bonanno, *Paolo Conte. Sotto le stelle del jazz. Naufragi, voli, canzoni* (Foggia: Bastogi, 2001), 37.

⁶² Paolo Zublena, “Max, non si spiega. Figure dell'opacità semantica in Paolo Conte,” in Centro studi Fabrizio De André, *Il suono e l'inchiostro*, 142.

⁶³ Paolo Conte, *Blue Tangos*, Paolo Conte, RCA record label, Mp3, 1996. An evocative live performance of *Blue tangos*, recorded in Lugano in 1988, may be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25hdicMcths>.

Blue tangos employs a precise metric scheme, that brings it closer to poetry, with stanzas of eight nine-syllable verses that feature rhyming couplets or consonances. These lyrics are wrapped in a chiasmic structure, with the last two verses rhyming with the first (*danza/sapienza, stanza/danza*) and an identical rhyme sealing the song's unity. One of these rhyming couplets, which creates an echo between stars and tiles (*stelle/piastrelle*), is conspicuous for its bizarre pairing. This unabashed combination of aulic and prosaic style has compelled critics to see an affinity between Conte and the poet Guido Gozzano, who raised to a poetic level a range of "simple things in bad taste."⁶⁴ Conte's precise metric scheme is not matched by the content of his descriptions, which are indeterminate and appear as incoherent flashes and suggestions. Zublena calls this indeterminacy, which constantly leaves the listener guessing, Conte's signature "semantic opacity," which uses riddles and obscure metaphors ("semantic hindering stones").⁶⁵ He describes them as typical of conversations in which the speakers already share a semantic field without need of introduction. Listeners, therefore, are required to make sense of the topic by themselves, almost as eavesdroppers on an already-started conversation about "the woman."

Blue tangos

*Sul ritmo scuro di una danza
piena di sogni e di sapienza
la donna accoglie i suoi ricordi
anche i più stupidi e balordi
C'è in lei una specie di cielo,
un'acqua di naufragio, un volo
dove giustifica e perdona
tutta la vita mascalzona.*

Blue Tangos

On the dark rhythm of a dance
Full of dreams and wisdom
The woman welcomes her memories,
Even the most stupid and bizarre ones.
There is in her a kind of sky,
Water from a shipwreck, a flight
Where all her scoundrel life
Is justified and forgiven.

Blu tango

*Parigi accoglie i suoi artisti
pittori, mimi, musicisti
offrendo a tutti quel che beve
e quel fiume suo pieno di neve
e la illusione di capire
con l'arte il vivere e il morire
su antichi applausi a fior di pelle
di molte donne ancora molto belle*

Blue tango

Paris welcomes her artists,
Painters, mimes, and musicians
Offering to all what she drinks
And that river of hers full of snow
And the illusion of understanding
Through art what it means to live and die
With the ancient applause on the skin
Of many, still-very-beautiful women

Blue tango

*Tra le ombre verdi di un bovindo
gustando un'acqua al tamarindo
l'uomo che ha niente da inventare*

Blue tango

Among the green shadows of a bay
window, sipping tamarind water
The man who has nothing to invent

⁶⁴ See Gianni Borgna and Luca Serianni, *La lingua cantata. L'italiano nella canzone d'autore dagli anni '30 ad oggi* (Rome: Garamond, 1995).

⁶⁵ Zublena, "Max, non si spiega," 138.

*prova a sognare, prova a sognare
e prova gli attimi e le stelle
e le fontane e le piastrelle
e i bagni turchi e ogni altra stanza
ma tutto ormai sventola e danza*

Tries to dream, tries to dream
And he tries the moments and the stars
And the fountains and the tiles
And the Turkish baths and any other room;
But, at this point, all is fluttering and
dancing

Blue tango

Blue tango

Blue tango and green *milonga*: this surrealist poetry is made of synesthetic combinations that are reminiscent of the gray song in *Canzoneta*. The use of colors is strong in Conte, who is also a painter (he painted the covers of his albums and composed a whole work, *Razmataz*, using the double media of music and canvas). Furnari suggests two uses of color in Conte's poetry: he privileges unusual colors that are themselves extremely evocative, such as indigo, amaranth and amber, or normal colors but in unexpected matches, such as *verde milonga*, blue tango, white lakes of silence, and green shadows. As for the blue of blue tango, it is the color of mystery and gloom and thus perfectly apt for a tango.⁶⁶

Paris Milonga (1981) is considered the album that brings Conte to a foreign elsewhere with its many references to distant places and rhythms. In this album, we find *Alle prese con una verde milonga*, a song that approximates hermetic poetry, with its hypnotic rhythm that accompanies the sensual anthropomorphization of a melody.⁶⁷ All the tropes used by tango are united here—the woman, the music, the elsewhere—in a song with “existential investment and ontological purpose.”⁶⁸ The lyrics begin by personifying the *milonga*, the dance of the Argentinian pampa, “written for me,” and directly speak to the dance as if it were a woman. The strained relationship between the sexes that is typical of tango is thus transferred onto the relationship with the dance, a “restless *milonga*, / who steals a smile of truce from me at every chord.” The sensual duel ends with the triumph of the poet who is finally able to domesticate the dance: “I woke her up and forced her to a slower rhythm.” Zoppi notices that Conte's “*milonga* features all its nuances, including those that refer to feminine archetypes.”⁶⁹ These nuances are the memory of the Argentine pampas but also the secondary meanings of the term *milonga* which can also designate “disorder, chaos, bitching,” the dancing clubs and the easy women who worked there.⁷⁰ However, in the song, more than a challenging woman, the *milonga* reveals its real origin as an indefinite elsewhere, its being “from the frontier, / a green frontier / a green frontier / between playing and loving.” The musician has no choice but to chase the music like a man in love, enchained to this fascinating, restless feminine creature.

The pursuit of the *milonga* ends when someone more important than Conte enters the scene and takes it over: Atahualpa, not the Inca emperor, but the major interpreter of *milonga* in Argentina. But is it Atahualpa Yupanqui, or is it a god—since in South America, God is only

⁶⁶ Manuela Furnari, *Paolo Conte. Prima la musica* (Milan: Il saggiatore, 2009), 107-109.

⁶⁷ Paolo Conte, *Alle prese con una verde milonga*, Paolo Conte, RCS Records Label, Mp3, 1981. A live performance of this song is at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuEfhz0OCwA>.

⁶⁸ Zublena, “Max, non si spiega,” 135.

⁶⁹ Zoppi, *Paolo Conte*, 80.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

“two steps away” (“Dio ti dice che sta lì a due passi”)?⁷¹ Conte described Atahualpa Yupanqui as “a god, a genius. I met him the first time in Sanremo, during the Tenco Prize. He made me discover the tenderness between a musician and his song and between the musician and his audience.”⁷² This tenderness between musician and song, this almost erotic bond, is at the center of this tango, which is also described as a “declaration of love and a profession of faith” to the *milonga*.⁷³

Alle prese con una verde milonga

Dealing with a Green Milonga

*Alle prese con una verde milonga
Il musicista si diverte e si estenua
e mi avrai, verde milonga che sei stata
scritta per me,
per la mia sensibilità,
per le mie scarpe lucidate,
per il mio tempo e per il mio gusto,
per tutta la mia stanchezza e la mia
guittezza.*

Dealing with a green milonga
The musician is entertained but exhausted
And you will have me, green milonga
Written for me,
For my sensibility
For my shiny shoes,
For my time and for my taste
For all my exhaustion and my artistry.

*Mi avrai, verde milonga inquieta
che mi strappi un sorriso di tregua
ad ogni accordo,
mentre fai dannare le mie dita*

You will have me, green restless milonga
You steal a smile of truce from me
At every chord
While you drive my fingers mad.

*Io sono qui, sono venuto a suonare,
sono venuto ad amare,
e di nascosto a danzare.*

I came here, I came to play music,
I came to love,
and secretly to dance.

*E ammesso che la milonga
fosse una canzone,
ebbene io l'ho svegliata e l'ho guidata
ad un ritmo più lento,
così la milonga rivelava di sè
molto più di quanto apparisse:
la sua origine d'Africa,
la sua eleganza di zebra,
il suo essere di frontiera, una verde
frontiera,
una verde frontiera tra il suonare e
l'amare,
verde spettacolo in corsa da inseguire
da inseguire sempre, da inseguire ancora,*

And even admitting the milonga
were a song,
Well, I woke her up and forced her
to a slower rhythm,
So the milonga revealed herself to be
More than what she appeared to be:
her African origins,
her zebra elegance,
her coming from the frontier, a green
frontier,
a green frontier between playing and
loving,
a green moving spectacle to chase,
to chase, and still to chase

⁷¹ This verse is in Conte's 1979 song, *Sud America* (Paolo Conte, *Sud America*, Paolo Conte, SONY BMG Music Entertainment (Italy), Mp3, 1979).

⁷² Enrico De Angelis, “Conversazione con Paolo Conte,” in De Angelis, *Tutto un complesso di cose*, 86.

⁷³ Bonanno, *Paolo Conte*, 45.

*fino ai laghi bianchi del silenzio
fin che Atahualpa o qualche altro dio
non ti dica:
descansate niño, che continuo io.*

to the white lakes of silence,
until Atahualpa or some other god,
says:
descansate niño (move away child), I'll
take it from here.

*Io sono qui, sono venuto a suonare,
sono venuto a danzare,
e di nascosto ad amare.*

I came here, I came to play music,
I came to dance,
and secretly to love.

The circle closes when, twenty-three years later, Conte returns to tango with *Il regno del tango* (2004, album *Elegia*).⁷⁴ The setting brings us back to the beginning of this essay, to the tango's birthplace and the early 1900s, among immigrants in a foreign land that could very well be Argentina. Also traditional is the structure of this last composition, which is quite homogeneous, with seven-, eight- and nine-syllable verses and rhyming couplets. Here, tango music regains the undertone of sadness it had at the time of its inception at the margins of society. Sadness and exclusion are conveyed in the quick lamentations of the *bandoneón*. The narrative, impressionistically rendered, includes the otherness of the "cardboard suitcase" filled with immigrant memories and the gray appearance of an anonymous man. This man, an artist and *encantador*, is kicked out of a *cinéma d'élite* without being heard, together with his *bandoneón*, which is no mere instrument but, compressed inside, hides the savage force of a wild lion. Tango is not a dance here but a secret weapon disguised under plain clothes or bottled up in an instrument case. The coordinating conjunction "but," in the fourth and seventh verse, hints at the inner life of the musician, who outwardly appears as a loser but conceals an internal power. The musician is a living oxymoron, leading a silent life in a noisy world; and his companion is a lion, not a lively cub, but a dignified old animal, wild and wise as tango music itself.

Il regno del tango

The Kingdom of Tango

*Non son neanche del paese
Ho una valigia di carton
Sono vestito sì in borghese
Ma dentro c'è il bandoneón.*

I am not even from this country
I carry a cardboard suitcase
I am dressed normally, yes
But inside there is the bandoneón.

*Potrei sembrare un ragioniere
Anche un geometra potrei
Ma un tango sento io gridare
In fondo ai sentimenti miei.*

I could pass for an accountant
Or a land surveyor,
But I hear a tango screaming
Inside my feelings.

*Fermo davanti ad un cinema
Del '900 d'élite
Dove ogni tanto fan musica*

Standing in front of the elite movie theatre
Of the early nineteen-hundreds
Where sometimes they play music

⁷⁴ Paolo Conte, *Il regno del tango*, Paolo Conte, Platinum Srl, Mp3, 2004. Also at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmLVFOLrQ-o>.

Sei giorni no e un giorno sì.

Only one day a week.

*Dan poco o niente di stipendio
Per un tanguero encantador
È questo dunque il bel compendio
Di un'esistenza di languor.*

They give little or no pay
For a *tanguero encantador*.
This is indeed a good synopsis
Of a languid existence.

*Ma non importa però vivo
Un bel silenzio nel rumor
E osservo con lo sguardo bravo
Il paesaggio dell'amor.*

But it does not matter if I live
A real silence in this noise
And if I observe with a brave gaze
The landscape of love.

*Ci sono anime segrete
fregate da un'ispirazion.
Sono persone che hanno sete
Di dadaismo, di astrazion.*

There are secret souls
cheated by an inspiration.
They are people who are thirsty
For Dadaism and abstraction.

*Ah, di un erotismo sconfinato
Che sembra quasi una illuzion
Come un mistero mormorato
Sui tasti del bandoneón.*

Ah, boundless eroticism
That seems almost an illusion,
Like a mystery murmured
On the bandoneón's keys.

*E sull'ingresso del cinema
La proprietaria mi fa:
"Eh, sono io la musica,
Va via pezzente, va, va."*

And at the entrance of the theatre
The owner says:
"Eh, I am the music,
Go away, bum, get out of here."

*Con una furia dinamica
Come se fosse un capron
Scalciando brutta bisbetica
Coi piedi sul bandoneón.*

With dynamic fury
Almost like an angry goat,
Kicking, this ugly bitch,
With her feet on my bandoneón.

*Bandoneón vecchio leon
Mordila,
Bandoneón vecchio leon
Mordila.*

Bandoneón, old lion,
Bite her
Bandoneón, old lion,
Bite her.

The *bandoneón*, faithful companion to the artist and ready to defend him against injustice, becomes co-protagonist in this tango. The *triunfante bandoneón* was also the hero of the old tango *Organito* (Graviz), in which it took the place of the humble *organito* and scared it away with its "sonorous fan." In Conte's hands, this German-Argentinian instrument finds a new personal embodiment: sometimes it introduces the whole album (*Aguaplano*); other times, such

as in *Madeleine*, it is played “as a string instrument, with long sentences and no accents.”⁷⁵ The simple use of the word *bandoneón* conjures up an entire world: it is one of those words that are powerfully evocative—like Aprilia, “when I say Aprilia I smell the smell of gas” admits Conte.⁷⁶ The *bandoneón*, the cardboard suitcase, and even the *cinéma d’élite* belong to this category not only as powerful images, but as metaphors. For Furnari, the movie theatre becomes a metaphor of “life that goes on,”⁷⁷ while for De Angelis the “hospitality due the artist” becomes a major “theme dear to Conte.”⁷⁸ The *bandoneón* is a multicultural instrument. It came to Argentina from Germany and still maintains a mysterious identity. It almost seems to mirror Conte’s own syncretism, his own multifaceted interests.

In Conte’s tangos—personal and syncretic—the Italian story of tango concludes its parable. The nostalgia of the immigrant has been quenched by the music into which he poured it. Meri Franco-Lao notes that *volver*—returning—is probably the most persistent theme in the history of tango, a “regression [...] until you realize that any return or beginning is impossible. There is always something or someone who comes back; or who will never come back. [...] Returning is definitely a key-verb” in tango lyrics.⁷⁹ Franco-Lao identifies twenty-eight tangos that make returning a “desperate obsession.”⁸⁰ Ironically, tango does come back to one of its homes, Italy, thus fulfilling that deep-rooted desire.

Notwithstanding his fame, Conte has never played in Argentina. This event would constitute the last chapter in the present story, one that has not yet been written but is long-awaited. The Argentinian-Italian blog—Largentina.org—points a finger in this direction: “If I could snap my fingers and make an Italian artist appear in Buenos Aires, I would choose Paolo Conte, without thinking. The Gran Rex is his theatre and I wait impatiently for that day.”⁸¹ The epic of the “Italian tango” would then continue with one more U-turn, to carry on its twisted journey.

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⁷⁵ De Angelis, “Intervista a Massimo Pitzianti,” 218. It seems that Conte discovered the accordion later because this instrument signified poverty and country values for Italians after the war. (See De Angelis, “Intervista a Massimo Pitzianti,” 219).

⁷⁶ Furnari, *Paolo Conte*, 135.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁷⁸ De Angelis, *Tutto un complesso di cose*, 35.

⁷⁹ Franco-Lao, *Tempo di tango*, 18.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ See site <Largentina.org>. Consulted on May 30, 2013, <http://www.largentina.org/>.

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