

On the High Art of Folk Poetry: What Jorge Luis Borges and Bob Dylan Have in Common

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Jorge Luis Borges and Bob Dylan? One name prompts the image of Argentina's erudite, blind bard, internationally renowned for his fiction, philosophical writings, fantastical tales, detective stories, and poetry, yet never more than a nominee for a Nobel Prize. The other conjures up the ruffled, unorthodox, gravelly-voiced nasal singer of ballads, blues, and rock songs, the American idol with a Welsh poet's borrowed name and a Nobel Prize for Literature. Different, for sure, but their similarities warrant a comparative reading of both figures.¹

Such a comparison generates not only a greater understanding of each artist's respective works, but also offers insights into the relationships between poetry and song in today's literary canon. Informed by interdisciplinary perspectives, the following exploration of Borges's *milonga* lyrics (an Argentine traditional song form) and Dylan's musical oeuvre allows us to contextualize each artist's "songbook."² The resultant reflections further suggest a reconsideration of the ever-prickly, ever-present predicaments posed by the high/low and erudite/folk artistic hierarchies and binaries that have precluded a more nuanced dialogic, broad-spectrum reading across the arts.

Seemingly incongruent with his intellectually complex writing, Borges's song lyrics have largely escaped the attention of both literary critics and folklorists. Yet Borges considered several of his *milongas* to be among "some of my best poems." In fact, when asked him why he had "condescended" to the *milongas*, Borges responded in no uncertain terms: "*No he condescendido. ¡Me he elevado a ellas!*" ("I have not condescended. I have elevated myself to them!").³

But what, exactly, did he mean? By deliberately taking up this celebrated Argentine folk song tradition, Borges's choice relates not simply to a poetic form. He very knowingly also keys into the conventions of a *milonga ethos*, which, briefly stated, champions the courage to speak one's mind. Among Argentina's traditional guitarist-

singers, this form of valor, executed through words—through song—constitutes an honorable feat, a commendable deed.⁴ By publishing his milongas, Borges therefore deliberately placed himself squarely within the larger Argentine song tradition, employing a genre that engages, and dialogues with, the nation’s historic, folkloric, musical, and literary past.

Similarly, Bob Dylan’s lyrics, recognized by the Nobel committee specifically for “having created a new poetic expression within the great American song tradition,” can be said to comprise, as Borges states above, an “elevated” achievement of having wedded ethics with aesthetics. By calling on traditional musical roots, Dylan took a principled stance, speaking for and galvanizing an entire generation during a period of great turmoil.

While in his texts from the 1920s Borges only wrote *about* milongas, in his collection of lyrics composed in the 1960s he concretely demonstrates folk mastery through the written performance of *actual* milonga poems. Twenty years later, in the 1980s, he then took another momentous leap, engaging, as we will see, not just in the *performance* of milongas, but in the *performative* dimension of what I have termed “milonguicity”—a move both poetic and ideological, which constitutes the essence of milongas. Rather than conceiving of milongas (and other traditional folksongs) as expressive acts that refer only to a prior, fixed text or tradition, the notion of “performativity” allows us to understand performance as a constitutive, creative, and emergent enactment with the capacity to *do*—to *perform*—and thereby regulate, cultural work.⁵

In this vein, milongas (and, indeed, most traditional expressive forms) can be thought of as generating not just cultural *meaning* but social, emotional, and political *action* in response to the needs of actual communities. In fact, long before theories of performativity allowed us to understand these cultural phenomena, *milongueros* (milonga singers) had already—to the degree that they valued and bragged about their skill—understood the significance, and political agency, of their art.

As early as the 1920s, Borges had begun to equate guitars with the geography of home. He understood that guitars permeate Argentine culture both as musical artifact and cultural symbol. Regarded as the national instrument, they’re used by artists and intellectuals to evoke *argentinidad* (Argentineness).⁶ In keeping with this notion, Borges writes in an early poem from the 1920s: “*Mi patria es un latido de guitarra*” (“My homeland is the sound of a guitar”).⁷

By 1965, however, when Borges finally published his milonga collection, the poems were no longer *about* guitars—they had become lyrics *for* guitar, as signaled in the anthology’s title, *Para las seis cuerdas* (*For the Six Strings*—otherwise simply rendered: *For the Guitar*, or *For Guitar*). In the preface to the book, he explains that “[i]n the modest case of my milongas, readers must supplement the absent music by imagining a man who sings softly [...] accompanying himself with a guitar” (“*En el modesto caso de mis milongas, el lector debe suplir la música ausente por la imagen de un hombre que canturrea [...] acompañándose con la guitarra*”).⁸

In the same vein, the guitar is one of the archetypal instruments in American vernacular music. Dylan certainly employed it in numerous ways throughout his repertoire—historically shocking folk music fans at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, when he first “went electric” in his performance on stage. Furthermore, Dylan’s keen interest in the guitar can be traced to another aspect of his oeuvre—as in the title of his experimental volume of prose poetry, *Tarantula*, written in 1965–66 and published in 1971. Dylan’s title alludes to Federico García Lorca, who also fashioned much of his poetry (most notably his *Romancero Gitano* [*Gypsy Ballads*], 1928) after traditional Gypsy songs, and regularly wrote about the guitar. Specifically referencing Lorca’s poetry collection titled *Poema del Cante Jondo* (*Poem of the Deep Song*) (1921), Christopher Rollason points out: “Lorca has a poem, ‘Las seis cuerdas’ (‘The six strings’), which compares a guitar to... a tarantula!” The lines read: “La guitarra [...] como la tarantula, teje una gran estrella” (“The guitar [...] like the tarantula, weaves a great star”).”⁹

Also formally shaped by the medieval and popular genre of the *romance* (Spain’s equivalent of the Anglo-Scottish ballad tradition), were Argentina’s *milongas*.¹⁰ Central to sung *milongas*, furthermore, is their argumentative or confrontational spirit, which harks back to the African roots of its etymology. Derived from Kimbundu (the second-most-widely-spoken Bantu language in Angola), the term “*milonga*” is the plural of *mulonga*, which signifies “words” or “wordiness,” further suggesting verbal entanglements or contestations.¹¹ Whether improvised in the moment or carefully constructed, *milongas* have very often served as a popular genre for making a claim, expressing an opinion, or voicing protest. Depending on their subject matter or circumstances, their tone can vary. They can be provocative, understated, humorous, playful, celebratory or witty. As in the case of many of Dylan’s songs, *milonga* lyrics have also been weaponized for waging war against oppressive authority and employed as vehicles for solidarity among disenfranchised peoples.

Borges, of course, knew all this well. He had read widely about the *milonga* tradition, and had heard and talked to *milonga* singers firsthand. He had observed up-close the *milonguero* world of the Buenos Aires outskirts, where he had grown up and where, as a young man, he had heard *milonga* singers—later “borrowing” (read “stealing”) verses from their songs for use in his own poetry, including *milongas*.¹² Not unique to Borges, the practice of incorporating other singers’ lines of one’s liking into newly composed *milongas* is a common practice among *milongueros*. Equally important for Borges were a wide range of influences from erudite literary traditions, including Virgil and Homer.

So, too, Bob Dylan has mined not just traditional folk song and music, but literary sources as well. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech he mentions how, “either knowingly or unintentionally,” the themes of novels such as *Don Quixote*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*, “worked their way into many of my songs.”¹³ He also goes on to discuss at greater length the impact on him of other texts, including *Moby Dick*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *The Odyssey*.

In the course he created titled “Bob Dylan,” Harvard University Professor of Classics Richard F. Thomas contextualizes the singer not just within the popular culture of the last half-century, but also within the tradition of classical poets such as Virgil and Homer. Citing T. S. Eliot’s maxim “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal,” Thomas observes that Dylan’s album *Modern Times* (2006) includes around twenty lines from Ovid’s exile poems; and in the song, “Ain’t Talkin’,” the singer is walking up a road “in the last outback, at the world’s end”—a direct quote from Peter Green’s translation of Ovid’s exile poetry. Moreover, this same song has three or four other Ovidian lines or significant phrases, all on one song from *Tristia*, Ovid’s night-of-exile poem.¹⁴ Furthermore, in the song “Thunder on the Mountain,” Dylan sings: “I’ve been sitting down studying the *Art of Love* / I think it will fit me like a glove.” Of course, as Thomas notes, “the *Ars Amatoria* isn’t explicitly in the lyrics, but as you listen, you’re thinking of Ovid”—thus recognizing not mere coincidence but a conscious intertext in Dylan’s lyrics.¹⁵

Likewise, there’s a reference to *The Odyssey* in Dylan’s song titled “Early Roman Kings,” from his album *Tempest* (2012). Near the end of the song, the following lines are taken verbatim from Robert Fagles’s translation of *The Odyssey* (where Odysseus taunts the Cyclops): “I can strip you of life / Strip you of death / Ship you down / To the house of death.” As with his lines taken from Ovid, Dylan here crosses genres, registers, and cultures by fitting excerpts from Homer into a Muddy Waters style blues.¹⁶

As with poet-singers in our societies, similar crossovers occurred among poet-singers of ancient times. Not unlike Borges and Dylan, Virgil and Ovid also expected their readers to be aware of intertexts, precedents, and their impact on (and interaction with) new settings, Thomas argues. In each case, they were aware of a song tradition—a poetics—which they mastered and could innovate upon, thereby making it timeless. In this respect, Thomas further observes, “I don’t see any difference between a poet like Catullus or Virgil and Bob Dylan”.¹⁷

Dylan also draws on English ballads, American folk music, minstrel songs, blues, and other sources for his lyrics. For example, in the song “Highlands,” from the album *Time Out of Mind* (1997), we hear the familiar refrain “My Heart’s in the Highlands.” This and other bits of the song’s lyrics come straight into Dylan’s song from Scottish poet Robert Burns (1759–1796). Known as the “National Bard,” Burns (like Borges and Dylan) was a lyricist and collector of folk songs. Also in this Anglo-Scottish border ballad tradition is another Dylan anthem, his famous “A Hard Rain’s Gonna Fall,” which uses the question and answer pattern modelled in the ballad “Lord Randall”: “O where ha you been, Lord Randall, my son? / And where ha you been, my handsome young man?”

Explicitly acknowledging his sources in his Nobel acceptance speech, Dylan claimed broad-ranging influences, both literary and musical. He was, for example, profoundly inspired by Buddy Holly and by the great American folk and blues musician Lead Belly, moniker of Huddie William Ledbetter (1888–1949). “By listening to all the

early folk artists and singing the songs yourself, you pick up the vernacular,” Dylan declared, “You internalize it. You sing it in the ragtime blues, work songs, Georgia sea shanties, Appalachian ballads and cowboy songs.”

Contrary to the high/low bias which often assumes production of folk music and song to be “unschooled,” we learn from his biographers the details regarding Dylan’s consummate command of poetic devices, techniques, structures, and traditions. “I had all the vernacular down. I knew the rhetoric. None of it went over my head—the devices, the techniques, the secrets, the mysteries” Dylan also reveals in his Nobel speech.¹⁸ Whether from written literary sources or from the great vernacular songwriting tradition transmitted by word of mouth, Dylan studied and mastered the art of sung poetry. Similarly, Borges had learned not only from literary masters, but also from the art of *milongueros* the conventions of folk and erudite poetry.

An important referent for Borges, for example, was José Hernández’s long poem *Martín Fierro* (1872), fashioned after traditional *payadas* (duels sung by rural gauchos, accompanied with guitar), which bear a relation to milonga stanzas.¹⁹ Reminiscent of *Martín Fierro*, whose gaucho singer-hero calls for divine inspiration and the aid of his muse, Borges’s “*Milonga de Dos Hermanos*” (“*Milonga of Two Brothers*”) calls on the guitar to recall past histories and bring memory to life. He opens by saying: “*Traiga cuentos la guitarra*” (“*Let the guitar bring forth stories*”).²⁰

Borges’s milongas further dialogue with the oral verbal art of traditional singers. “I was once at a meal,” he recalls, “and the *payador* [singer-improvisor], a good man, dedicated verses to all those present, and I liked the strophe he addressed to me, because it began ‘*Y a usted, compañero Borges, / lo saludo enteramente*’ [‘And to you, comrade Borges, an unconditional salute’].” Years later, Borges responded to this “social greeting” with his own “*Milonga de Nicanor Paredes*,” which declares: “*Le estoy cantando, señores, / a don Nicanor Paredes*” (“*Don Nicanor Paredes / Is the subject of my song*”).²¹ Several other Borges milongas likewise include such “dedications” or “inscriptions”—commonly used devices by *milongueros*, designed to establish a familiar, conversational tone.²² In fact, Borges characterized the milonga as “*una de las grandes conversaciones de Buenos Aires*” (“one of Buenos Aires’ great conversational forms”).²³

Further contributing to this conversational (and dialogic) tenor in milongas, Borges made ample use of the proverbs, popular sayings, folk humor, and mordantly ironic understatements traditionally uttered among common folk in the Argentine countryside and outskirts of Buenos Aires. Dylan, too, referenced minor folk genres and vernacular speech in his poetry and even reworked, in his album *Under the Red Sky* (1990), for example, the popular genre of nursery rhymes. Indeed, in their nomination speech, the Nobel jurors recognized that “From what he discovered in heirloom and scrap, in banal rhyme and quick wit, in curses and pious prayers, sweet nothings and crude jokes, [Dylan] panned poetry gold, whether on purpose or by accident is irrelevant; all creativity begins in imitation.” No doubt, in the case of both authors, the use not only of formulaic phrases, but also of references to an entire world view

expressed through a multiplicity of social voices, played an important role in their lyrics.

By composing milongas in this spirit, Borges's poems share authority with their very tradition. Such is the case, to cite just one example, with the dialogic, intertextual lyrics of "*Milonga de Calandria*" ("Milonga of Calandria"). In these verses, the reader/listener is drawn back to voices and personages from the past. When I asked Borges, in May 1983, about the source for this milonga, he readily cited the French-Argentine writer Paul Groussac (1848–1929). Referring to Calandria as "the last Argentine outlaw," Groussac sketched and immortalized Calandria in a narrative which, in turn, perpetuates the oral story told to him by an *estanciero* (rancher) from the province of Entre Rios, regarding the courageous, defiant, and playful *gaucho peon*, famous for his knife duels.²⁴ Also resonant in Borges's milonga, are the lyrics of an early tango (the kind Borges liked), titled "Calandria," authored by Ángel Villoldo (1861–1919). The first-person poetic voice of the tango lyrics is none other's than that of Calandria, who unabashedly boasts: "*Aquí tienen a Calandria, / que es un mozo de renombre / el que cantando milongas / siempre se hace respetar.*" ("Here you have Calandria / who's a young man of renown / who when singing milongas / always gets respect.")

Borges's choice to sing about Calandria is further interesting because the protagonist's nickname is also the name of a native Argentine bird. Known for its ability to sing in any voice, the *calandria* (*Mimus saturninus modulator*, or calender), is considered a symbol of freedom in the Argentine countryside. A perfect mimic, the local bird is known in folklore as "the poet of the countryside," its very name inspiring popular sayings which celebrate, as does Borges, the gaucho singer's values and verbal art. "*Libre o muerto, como la calandria*" ("Freedom or death, like a *calandria*"), and "*Calandria y gaucho, dejarlos libres*" ("Calandrias and gauchos, give them freedom") are two such examples of popular sayings that underscore the gaucho's resistance to authority. Additionally, "*Tiene pico 'e calandria*" ("S/he has the beak of [sings like] a *calandria*") and "*Calandria pa' el amor*" ("*Calandria* for making love") indicate the seductive voice and clever "words" of a *calandria*'s song.

Borges's lyrics further employ yet another traditional folk song device used in milongas to create a dialogic or conversational tone. By posing questions (as does Dylan in "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall," and "Blowin' in the Wind"), Borges prompts readers/listeners (as do all milongueros) to reflect collectively with singers and their audiences. In Borges's case, he employs the popular *ubi sunt* motif, repeatedly inquiring in his milonga titled "*¿Dónde se habrán ido?*": "¿Where have they gone?; then assuring us, in the milonga's refrain: "*No se aflija. En la memoria*" ("Don't worry. In our memory").²⁵ This response calls to mind the well-known line in the final verses of *Martín Fierro*, where Hernández asserts the importance of his poem in keeping memory alive: "*Me tendrán en su memoria /para siempre mis paisanos*" ("My countryment will forever / have me in their memory").²⁶ Similarly, in the poem titled "*El tango*," (which predates his milongas), Borges responds to the "Where are they?"

interrogation as follows: “*En la música están; en el cordaje / de la terca guitarra trabajosa / que trama en la milonga venturosa / la fiesta y la inocencia del coraje*” (“They're in the chords, intense and weary, / Of the obstinate labored guitar / That contrives the joyful milonga, far / Into the feast of innocent bravery”).²⁷ He thus underscores the common interrelated references inherent in traditional milongas to song (verbal art), to the guitar, and to courage.

Interestingly, the ascendancy of Bob Dylan and the publication of Borges's milongas both occurred in the 1960's. This was a decade of radical cultural change—a period during which high/low hierarchies crossed boundaries, responding to major political and social changes, replacing the notion of “universal truths.” Subject to ideology, technology, economics, and numerous other factors, cultural categories that seemed immutable became permeable and subject to modifications and transformation during this era of social and cultural revolution. In the spirit of breaking away from the rigid high/low classifications, academic and intellectual pursuits also revised their focus. Greater attention was given to “ethnic” studies (consider the rise of academic disciplines such as ethnohistory, ethnomusicology, and ethnopoetry). Though already an established discipline, the field of folklore studies also grew significantly during the 1960s-1970s, placing importance not only on texts, but also on performance and context. These paradigmatic modifications recanted the notion that humanists study “high” art, whereas social scientists are relegated to studying only “high” art's “low” counterpart. Half a century later, in choosing Dylan as the 2016 Nobel Laureate in Literature, the Swedish Academy showed they had caught up with this shift.

Long before these occurrences, however, Borges knew that it was a mistake to assume “*que la erudición tiene que excluir la guitarra y excluir el payador y excluir lo criollo*” (“that erudition has to exclude the guitar and exclude the *payador* and exclude what is *criollo* [that which is considered wholly Argentine]”).²⁸ He further argued, as early as in the 1920s, that our erudite bias mistakenly grants “*categoría de arte a un soneto malo*,” (“the category of art to a bad sonnet”) but not to “*una bien versificada milonga*” (“a well-versed milonga”).²⁹ Such bias arguably lies not only in how we define art, but in how we define “literacy” and “performance competence.” José Hernández, well before Borges, shed light on this through the words of the gaucho hero Martín Fierro:

Yo no soy cantor letrado,	I'm not a literate singer
mas si me pongo a cantar	but once I begin to sing
no tengo cuándo acabar	I can go on forever
y me envejezco cantando:	and grow old singing:

Las coplas me van brotando
me

My verses flow from

*como agua de manantial.*³⁰

like water from a spring.

But let us return to the social, cultural, and political context of the 1960s, when folksong movements, such as the *Nueva Canción* (New Song), took hold across much of the Americas, spawning poet-singers who not only wrote beautiful verse but voiced protests about social and political conditions in both North and Latin America. Think of Violeta Parra, Silvio Rodríguez, Mercedes Sosa, Atahualpa Yupanqui, Joan Baez, Pablo Milanés, Pete Seeger. In the United States, the civil rights movement had come to a head; the Cold War had morphed from a war in Korea to another in Vietnam; and, with the Baby Boom generation coming of age, revolution was in the air. At this juncture, Bob Dylan's song "The Times They Are A-Changin'" had become an anthem. "This was definitely a song with a purpose," he tells us. "It was influenced of course by the Irish and Scottish ballads ... 'Come All Ye Bold Highway Men', 'Come All Ye Tender Hearted Maidens'." As Dylan further explains: "I wanted to write a big song, with short concise verses that piled up on each other in a hypnotic way. The civil rights movement and the folk music movement were pretty close for a while and allied together at that time." He pointedly recalls: "I had to play this song on the same night that President Kennedy died. Somehow it became a constant opening song and remained that for a long time".³¹ No doubt, these songs—by voicing what was otherwise not being so dramatically articulated—performed vital cultural work, giving ordinary folks and disenfranchised communities a political (and artistic) voice.

Borges, meanwhile, was also at the height of his popularity in the 1960s—not as a traditional poet-singer but as a Latin American writer of international fame. Despite the fact that Borges's milongas have been set to music by a range of important folk, popular, and classical composers (Astor Piazzolla, Sebastián Piana, and Carlos Guastavino, among others), few readers looked away from his erudite, fantastical stories to read (or listen to) Borges's milongas. In truth, both literary critics and folklorists seemed to lack the critical apparatus for writing about actual "folk" poems produced by an "erudite" writer like Borges. Nor did it cross their minds that Bob Dylan would, in time, become the recipient of a Nobel Prize for Literature.

It was only in the 1980s that one of Borges's milongas acquired the political importance that Dylan's songs had achieved culturally and politically in the 1960s.

Although *Para las seis cuerdas* represented a courageous literary move—from erudite poet-observer to active singer-participant (virtually picking up the guitar and performing within the aesthetic conventions of traditional *milongueros*)—Borges had yet to prove another kind of courage. As boastfully voiced in the popular anonymous milonga stanza Borges often liked to quote, he had to prove the courage of his conviction:

Soy del barrio 'e Monserrá
 donde relumbra el acero;
 lo que digo con el pico
 lo sotengo con el cuer

I'm from the barrio of Montserrat
 where the steel blade shines;
 what I contend with my lips
 I back up with my hide.

Borges ultimately accomplishes this in “*Milonga del muerto*” (“Milonga for a Dead Man”), which first appeared in 1982, in the Buenos Aires daily *Clarín*, under the title “*Milonga de un soldado*” (“Milonga of a Soldier”). Unlike his first milongas about local knife fighters, heroic *barrio* characters, and historical events (from which he was distanced by space and time), “*Milonga del muerto*” was composed in “real time.” Subsequently set to music by Sebastián Piana, and performed and recorded by Sandra Mihanovich, Eduardo Falú, and others, this “protest song” emerged organically from the immediacy of a sociohistorical moment of great anguish and consequence for Borges and Argentines in general: the *Guerra de las Malvinas* (Falklands War).

Borges’s antiwar poem not only enacts the *aesthetics* of the milonga genre, it engages the *ethics* of the milonga tradition. In the midst of the 1976–1983 Argentine dictatorship, Borges once more turned to the guitar, not simply to sing *about* fighting, but—like José Hernández and countless anonymous *milongueros*—to *cantar opinando* (to sing one’s opinions), and *pelear cantando* (to do battle singing).³² Borges’s stanzas in this milonga, like those of other singers before him, are fighting words. In fact, so dangerously provocative are his verses that the Argentine military government of the early 1980s censored the poem.³³ By speaking out subversively against the military government in this way, Borges positioned himself on the side of the voiceless, unknown soldier of the poem. This performative move constitutes the very enactment of *milonguicity*.

Significantly, “*Milonga del muerto*” is not an isolated text at the end of Borges’s life. Another song, “*Milonga del infiel*” (“Milonga of the Infidel”), included along with “*Milonga del muerto*” in Borges’s final book *Los conjurados* (1985), refers to another, earlier military conflict in the nation’s history—the so-called Conquest of the Desert (1878–85), during which indigenous tribes were slaughtered. Both poems implicitly lay bare the parallels between the brutal deaths of presumed “barbarians” in the nineteenth century and of innocent conscripts in the cold, deserted islands of the twentieth.³⁴ In still another example from his later milongas, titled “*Milonga del puñal*” (“Milonga of the Dagger”), the lyrics issue an alert against potential future violence, implicitly condemning a history of dictatorship.

Although I have not explicitly addressed the significance of Dylan’s music or the various musical settings for Borges’s milongas (which would require another essay), I nevertheless want to underscore in our engagement with song the importance not only of orality but also of aurality. We would be remiss to ignore sonorities that signal ways of hearing and, thereby, ways of formulating aesthetic forms to assert social power. To be sure, the act of listening is never innocent; like the art of speaking, it is culturally and politically charged. Consciously or not, we participate in any number of

interpretative moves to understand sound (particularly the verbal components of song). For example, when we listen, we engage in the localization of aural, the harnessing of tradition, and in the construction and production of knowledge, both intellectual and sensorial. Such engagement, of course, is inextricably entangled with the politics of expression and belonging that are intrinsic to the art of Bob Dylan and Jorge Luis Borges.

As Borges noted in one of his Harvard lectures, “Truly fine poetry must be read aloud [...] a poem requires it be [recited orally]. Poetry always remembers that it was an oral art before it was a written art. It remembers that it was first [a] song”.³⁵ Similarly, Dylan accentuates in his Nobel acceptance speech that songs “are meant to be sung, not read on a page.” Likewise, the Nobel Award presentation speech also points out: “In a distant past, all poetry was sung or tunefully recited, poets were [rhapsodists], bards, troubadours; ‘lyrics’ come from ‘lyre’.” Here, once again, “lyre” takes us back to the guitar—be it Dylan’s electric guitar or Borges’s *guitarra criolla*.

From the anonymous folk who did not wait for print to begin singing and expressing their opinions, as from our literary artists today, we receive (and pass on) stories and histories that join, shape, and imagine communities—stories of adventure, honor, romance, quests, war, and countless other shared human experiences. Borges recalls Homer’s words in *The Odyssey*: “The gods weave misfortunes for men, so that the generations to come will have something to sing about,” adding that even when forgetting sets in, “something remains, and that something is history or poetry, which are not essentially different”.³⁶ Indubitably, associated with the birth of poetry as with oral traditions, are a series of mnemonic devices designed to prevent forgetfulness.

Accordingly, as early as 1930 Borges reflected on the strongly held conviction of Scottish writer, politician, and patriot Andrew Fletcher (1653–1716), who expressed: “Let me make the songs of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws.” “[T]his view,” Borges writes, “suggests that ordinary or traditional poetry can influence sentiments and dictate conduct.”³⁷ In keeping with this idea, President Jimmy Carter asserted, when Bob Dylan received the Person of the Year Award at the 2015 MusiCares Grammy ceremony: “There is no doubt that [Dylan’s] words on peace and human rights are much more incisive, much more powerful, and much more permanent than of any president of the United States.”³⁸ As Borges realized by the end of his life, traditional poetry (in his case milongas) not only influences feelings or dictates conduct—their very enactment constitutes a worldview.

Consequently, Borges’s and Dylan’s lyrics accomplish critical cultural work, extending their artistic reach in the direction of both traditional oral sources and erudite literary works. Both poets have elevated their art—and themselves—to the not-so-“ordinary” realm of popular song. Their work makes plain the false dichotomies and hierarchies so often imposed by critics on the “high art of folk poetry” sung to guitars. Borges’s and Dylan’s lyrics confirm (as the Nobel committee acknowledged in 2016) that, just as vital today as in the distant past, sung poetry persists as a noble—if not in every worthy case Nobel—literary art.

Notes

- 1 This is a version of an article which first appeared in Spanish (Cara 2018) under a slightly different title; Ana C. Cara, “¿Qué tienen en común Jorge Luis Borges y Bob Dylan? Sobre el elevado arte de la poesía popular,” in *Palabras enlazadas: Estudios en homenaje al profesor László Scholz*, ed. Zsuzsanna Bárkányi and Margit Santosné, (Szeged: Jate Press, 2018), 87–98. The translation into English, including edits and additions, are mine. I am grateful to Phyllis Gorfain and Güneli Gün for their helpful comments, and to Bernard F. Stehle for his suggestions and detailed edits. Unless otherwise indicated, the translations of texts quoted from the original Spanish are also mine.
- 2 The focus of this essay is on the traditional (often improvised) verbal art or poetic lyrics of milonga songs practiced in Argentine culture, and those written by Jorge Luis Borges. However, “milonga” also identifies a dance form and is colloquially used in Argentina to reference any lively party or gathering. By extension, the term is applied both locally and internationally to dance halls and events where tango and milonga dancing occur.
- 3 Carlos Cortínez, “Con Borges,” *Anales de la Universidad de Chile* 141–44 (Jan.–Dec. 1967): 143.
- 4 Cara, 4–5.
- 5 The notion of performativity, as articulated by various philosophers and scholars, but most notably by Judith Butler, is helpful for understanding this difference. Butler describes performativity as “that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomenon that it regulates and constrains” (Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* [New York: Routledge, 1993], xii. See also Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
- 6 Melanie Plesch, “The Topos of the Guitar in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Argentina,” *The Musical Quarterly* 92, nos. 3–4 (2009): 242.
- 7 Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974), 62.
- 8 Borges, *Obras completas*, 953. This particular passage and all translations from *Para las seis cuerdas* (*For the Six Strings*) are by myself and David Young.
- 9 Christopher Rollason, “‘Solo Soy Un Guitarrista’: Bob Dylan in the Spanish-Speaking World—Influences, Parallels, Reception, and Translation,” *Oral Tradition* 22, no. 1 (2007): 124–25.
- 10 In keeping with its traditional structure, Borges follows the typical octosyllabic lines of milonga verses and the predominantly “abcb” rhyme pattern inherited from the *ro-mance* (Spanish ballad) folk tradition.
- 11 Vicente Rossi, *Cosas de negros* (Buenos Aires: Librería Hachette, 1953), 116–17.

- ¹² Jorge Luis Borges, *Cuaderno San Martín* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Proa, 1929), 56; and Ana Cara-Walker, “Borges’s Milongas: The Chords of Argentine Verbal Art,” in *Borges the Poet*, ed. Carlos Cortínez (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1986), 288-89.
- ¹³ Bob Dylan, Nobel Lecture, transcript, The Nobel Prize in Literature 2016, June, 5, 2017, NobelPrize.org. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2016/dylan/lecture/>
- ¹⁴ Jennifer Schuessler and Dina Kraft, “Bob Dylan 101: A Harvard Professor Has the Coolest Class on Campus,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 14, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/15/arts/music/bob-dylan-101-a-harvard-professor-has-the-coolest-class-on-campus.html?mtref=www.google.com>
- ¹⁵ The Persephone Editorial Staff. “An interview with Richard F. Thomas on Bob Dylan and the Classics,” *Persephone: The Harvard Undergraduate Classics Journal* 1, no. 1, (Winter 2016): 3. https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/sites/projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/persephone/files/thomas_interview_winter_2016.pdf
- ¹⁶ Schuessler and Kraft, “Bob Dylan 101.”
- ¹⁷ Schuessler and Kraft, “Bob Dylan 101.”
- ¹⁸ Dylan, Nobel Lecture.
- ¹⁹ In the face of colliding urban and rural cultures (as Buenos Aires expanded into the sur-rounding countryside at the turn of the twentieth century), milongas gradually replaced old-style *payadas*, becoming the iconic song form of the liminal urban rim. “[E]l payador se fue esfumando en el milonguero” (“The *payador* faded into the *milonguero*”), Vicente Rossi writes, adding “y la Payada ... se convirtió en la Milonga.” (“and the Payada... turned into the Milonga”), (Rossi, *Cosas de negros*, 115, 120).
- ²⁰ Borges, “Milonga of Two Brothers,” *Obras completas*, 955.
- ²¹ Borges, *Obras completas*, 961.
- ²² Ana Cara-Walker, “Borges’s Milongas: The Chords of Argentine Verbal Art,” in *Borges the Poet*, ed. Carlos Cortínez (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1986), 288.
- ²³ Borges, *Obras completas*, 133.
- ²⁴ *Jorge Luis Borges selecciona lo mejor de Paul Groussac* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Fraterna, 1981), 137-44.
- ²⁵ Borges, *Obras completas*, 957-58.
- ²⁶ José Hernández, *Martín Fierro* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Kapelusz, 1958), 245.
- ²⁷ Borges, *Obras completas*, 888-89.

- ²⁸ Tabaré De Paula, “Borges,” *Rincón del payador* 2–3 (1980): 9.
- ²⁹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Textos Recobrados*, 1919–1920 (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1997), 366.
- ³⁰ Hernández, *Martín Fierro*, 7.
- ³¹ Rock and Roll Hall, “Songs that Shaped Rock and Roll: ‘The Times They Are A-Changin’,” Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, May 14, 2016, <https://www.rockhall.com/songs-shaped-rock-and-roll-times-they-are-changin>
- ³² In *Martín Fierro*, Hernández writes: “Yo he conocido cantores / Que era un gusto el escuchar, / Mas no quieren opinar / Y se divierten cantando; / Pero yo canto opinando, / Que es mi modo de cantar.” (“I have known singers / Who were a joy to hear, / But they won’t state an opinion / And just have a good time singing; / However, I sing stating my views, / Which is my mode of singing”) (95).
- ³³ Ana C. Cara, “Fighting Words, Disarming Music: Jorge Luis Borges’s ‘Milonga del muerto,’” *Variaciones Borges* 35 (2013): 9.
- ³⁴ Cara, 13–14.
- ³⁵ Jorge Luis Borges, *Seven Nights*, trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions, 1984), 9–10.
- ³⁶ Borges, *Seven Nights*, 10.
- ³⁷ Borges, *Obras completas*, 164.
- ³⁸ BBC News, “Bob Dylan Takes on Critics in Acceptance Speech,” Feb. 9, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-31292870>

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