

The Tango in Prints and in Song

MOST HISTORIES OF THE ARGENTINE TANGO INEVITABLY MENTION two important figures from the music's early years: Juan de Dios Filiberto (1885–1964) and Enrique Santos Discépolo (1901–51). Filiberto is still regarded fondly in La Boca, the portside neighborhood where he grew up. During the 1930s and 1940s, he led one of the most popular orchestras in the city of Buenos Aires, and he also composed *Caminito*, one of the most beloved tangos. Enrique Santos Discépolo (or Discepolín as he is called to distinguish him from his also famous older brother Armando) wrote some of the most important tango poetry. Generally regarded as “the philosopher of the tango,” in the words of one chronicler, Discepolín was “the greatest tango lyricist that has ever lived.”¹ Both performers left important marks on the tango, Filiberto with his music and Discepolín with his verse. Moreover, they collaborated on one 1929 tango, *Malevaje* (The Gang).

An exploration of their origins reveals that both were intellectually nourished in the studio of Los Artistas del Pueblo, and both gave warm testimony in their later lives about the importance of the experience. Filiberto, for example, said of the studio, “It was a happy and lively bohemia of hopes and dreams which united us in a common search for beauty; and each of us left there absorbed in our own definite cause.”² He appeared in

the drawing that Arato made of the studio artists (see fig. 3). Discepolín was younger than any other member of the group, and he looked up to Facio who was twelve years his senior. His recollections are more explicit about the group's impact on him:

It was the authentic bohemia of Murger—without all that literature—that we lived and suffered in Buenos Aires. And what a bohemia! . . . It was a wonderful time of youthful dreams and unweaned hopes recently born. We argued, because we didn't have anything else to do, and because it was a beautiful way to spend time, when time was all we had to spend. We talked about everything, beginning with Baudelaire and maybe ending with a discussion of the best way to cook the Steak à la Portuguese which we would never get to eat. . . . I myself perhaps picked up there a melody or a verse for songs which took form much later.³

Thus Filiberto and Discepolín attested to the group's importance in their early formation, and as we look in more detail at their mutual interactions, we will find many instances of inspiration and philosophical connection. On the other hand, just as tango music enriched the lives of the group, the artists sometimes depicted the world of the tango in their works. Examining these early tango creators against this artistic environment will show the leftist political roots of the composer and the lyricist; more important, it will show in clear relief the ways in which musicians and visual artists diverged in their attitudes toward the tango in particular and popular culture in general.

A mostly self-taught musician, Filiberto came to the tango through a circuitous route. Active in anarchist labor unions, he helped organize a strike of his fellow stevedores in 1907. He was a close friend of Santiago Stagnaro, the artist whose activity in the anarchist Boilermakers' Union forced his exile to Montevideo. Filiberto formed the musical group *Orfeón del Futuro* in 1908; they gave outdoor spontaneous serenades that featured anarchist songs. The group's repertoire avoided tangos, because the urgency of the leftist causes that united them kept them from playing music that they apparently regarded as frivolous. "I was opposed to tango in those days . . . [I asked myself] Me? Write a tango? It seemed impossible."⁴ In 1909, he met painter Benito Quinquela Martín, beginning a lifelong friendship. As his career shifted

away from day labor toward musical performance, the pressure of public opinion led him to compose his first tango in 1915, and the Breyer publishing house began to issue his work as sheet music. On one 1916 visit to the printing shop to demonstrate a song, he met the young lithographer Adolfo Bellocq, who would also soon join the Facio studio. Filiberto began to frequent the studio near the time of Stagnaro's untimely death in 1918.

Filiberto brought to this group a working-class background, a commitment to anarchism, and a certain delight in bohemian pranks. His incorporation into the studio appears to have gone smoothly. When he married in 1918, the group staged a mock religious ceremony in the studio for him and his new wife. Abraham Vigo served as "priest" and wore a huge red false nose. Arato was the "acolyte" dressed in a monk's costume topped with a harlequin's bonnet. Facio and Riganelli were "godparents" in the costume of funeral drivers, and Quinquela was "witness," dressed in a brightly colored Roman toga and battle helmet. Vigo used a long-handled paintbrush to "bless" the new couple.⁵

Filiberto also used his skill with the harmonium to enliven the group's public presence. Agustín Riganelli recalled some of the group's lighter moments in the streets: "We initiated a new type of serenade. In these outings Filiberto went along, carrying his harmonium and playing his famous tangos. The police would stop us, but in the end we convinced them that this was very beautiful music . . ."⁶ Facio recalled that at times the group took cover from the police by chanting political slogans for the recently elected UCR party of Hipólito Yrigoyen: "On many occasions the noise became quite loud and drew the attention of policemen; when they complained to us we would begin to shout 'Long Live the Radical Party! Long Live Dr. Yrigoyen!' and the police disappeared as if by magic."⁷ Filiberto continued to compose, formed a band, and rode the wave of increasing interest in the tango to become a celebrity. Such was his fame that he was mentioned in a 1920 musical, in which two of the characters indulge in an argument of the relative merits of classical music and the tango. When one mentions Beethoven and Chopin, the other gives a riposte that puts Filiberto at the head of a list of that moment's favored tango performers:

That gaggle of foreigners that you just named is a little scary, because they have long hair and difficult names. But Filiberto, Firpo, Canaro,

and Galimberti . . . these are the kings of the dance floor, the princes of rhythm, the barons of music! . . . What do you want with your skeletons?⁸

Yet Filiberto's doubts about the tango persisted for some years. It is difficult to say how one could infuse tango music with anarchist fervor, so traces of his youthful leftism are not discernible in his tunes. Tango lyrics could make leftist statements, but Filiberto never regarded himself as a poet. His best-known composition, *Caminito* (Little Alley), was inspired by longing for the old neighborhood of La Boca where he grew up. The lyric, by Gabino Coria, traffics in the common tango theme of gentle nostalgia:

Little Alley now covered with weeds
The hand of time blots out your traces.
At your side I would gladly lie down
When time finally does away with us both.

This tango became so popular that civic authorities in La Boca later spruced up a diagonal alley in the center of the neighborhood and named it *Caminito*. Even as he performed them to ever-increasing acclaim, Filiberto said, his tangos "gave me material benefits at the price of moral satisfaction."⁹

The works that the visual artists produced on the tango point in similarly contradictory directions. Some participate in the spread and domestication of the tango, while others depict the dance as the heady and sensuous pastime of undesirables. The first prints on the tango by a member of Los Artistas are sheet music covers that Bellocq made for the Breyer publishing house (fig. 63). In the rather humorous sheet called *El Anatomista* ('The Anatomist'), a singer wearing a laboratory apron accompanies himself by strumming a rib cage as if it were a guitar. A skeleton at the left scratches its head in bafflement, as a cat skeleton at the lower right raises its tail and arches its back as if angry. This tango was composed for the Physicians' Dance, an event that first took place in 1914, at which tangos alternated with other kinds of dance music. The event was repeated annually thereafter until the police in 1918 forbade further installments. They took this action because the medical students at those dances "engaged in rivalries in their urge to carry out the most grotesque and shocking pranks," according to Francisco Canaro, who also played there:



Fig. 63.
Adolfo Bellocq,
El Anatomista,
1916. Lithograph
sheet music cover,
25 × 34 cm.

There were cases in which they cut the hands off cadavers in the morgue, dressed the bodies in sheets like ghosts, and after attaching the stiff frozen hands to sticks, passed them in front of the women's faces, with the results that one could imagine. . . . And they played other tricks of that sort, exhibiting other human organs which they took from hospital research laboratories.¹⁰

The musicians who played at these events joined to some extent in their spirit. Canaro composed for one year's event a tango called *Matasano* (The Quack). The word is a macabre version of the word *matasiete*, a slang term for hero (literally, killer of seven). Vicente Greco, who later took over from

Canaro's band the musical duties for the event, composed *El Anatomista* in 1916. Bellocq, who was still working in the print shop before definitely joining Los Artistas del Pueblo the following year, got in the spirit as well. His lithograph cover appears to show a well-dressed hospital orderly making foul use of medical material. The skeleton at the left is apparently too revolted to join the fun.

If Vicente Greco (1888–1924) played along with the pranks of the medical students, he was also a very important figure in the “rise” of the tango out of the arrabales and toward the center of town. Indeed, his career tracks rather closely the transformation of the tango from forbidden rite to popular craze. He began his musical career as a teenager, playing guitar in whorehouses in the barrio San Cristóbal, south of downtown.¹¹ By 1906 he was playing in clubs in the still-raucous neighborhood of La Boca with a quintet consisting of two bandoneons, two violins, and a flute. Abraham Vigo, whose art we shall consider more fully in the next chapter, made a genre painting whose subject was a humble watering hole in La Boca (fig. 64). Almost as an afterthought, he placed some musicians on a ledge in the upper left. The bandoneon player, whose instrument marks this group as a tango group, sits between two guitar players. This is a relatively primitive form of tango instrumentation, unless there are other musicians out of our view.

In 1910 Greco took his group to the Café El Estribo, in a downtown location seven blocks from the Congress building. By that year the tango was already well on the way to public acceptance. Most musical shows by then included tango numbers in which an appropriately picturesque pick-pocket strutted with a well-muscled ballerina.¹² The tango began to pick up sung lyrics in these shows, and from there the music spread easily to cafés, sound recordings, and later to radio. In 1913 there was a three-day tango festival at the Palace Theater on Corrientes Street in the heart of the theater district; a son-in-law of one of Argentina's former presidents was master of ceremonies.¹³ Greco's group, riding the wave of public acceptance, made some of the first recordings of tango music in either late 1911 or early 1912. By this time he began calling his group La Orquesta Típica Criolla de Vicente Greco (Vicente Greco's Typical Creole Band), to distinguish it from groups that played “typical” Spanish or Cuban music. From that day forward, Orquesta Típica was the preferred name for tango orchestras. In 1912, Greco opened his act with an enlarged group at the



Fig. 64. Abraham Vigo, *El Bodegón* (The Tavern), 1930. Oil on canvas, 36 × 77 cm.

fashionable Armenonville Club in the upper-class district of Palermo. So when the physicians hired him for their 1916 dance, they were employing one of the leading orchestras of the day, and one that pioneered instrumental arrangements that later became the norm.

The production of sheet music in the years surrounding World War I played an important role in the domestication of the tango, since a piano arrangement suitably denatured the suggestive aspects of the dance by changing the instrumentation and removing it to the private home. The tango thus entered, “with firm gait and overpowering rhythm into the resistant bastions of the middle class, into its very homes . . . The tango finally penetrated those precincts by means of sheet music.”¹⁴ Along with sheet music came tango teachers. A magazine writer in 1921 noted ironically that many tango dancers who perfected their steps in the sultry clubs of the arrabal were now making career changes as the tango penetrated the upper social circles and middle-class persons began to seek it out. The new tango teacher, he wrote,

this man of somewhat shady background, who until yesterday could not have put any occupation on his identity card because his previous occupation was to avoid having one, today dispenses instruction. . . . Families that before would never have greeted him on the street now wait for him to display his moves in their living rooms.¹⁵

In order to navigate the social journey, and land safely on the music stand of a middle-class piano, a successful tango sheet needed to have a catchy illustration, and Bellocq provided these on several occasions.

Bellocq made other prints that depicted tango music, but these showed none of the tango's evolving role in popular taste. Rather they were rooted in its days as an arrabal dance or an accompaniment to prostitution. His next attempt at picturing the tango was in Manuel Gálvez's novel *Historia de Arrabal*. This novel contained a tango scene, and Bellocq's illustration (fig. 65) depicts a courtyard beneath a trellis with a lamp at the right and double doors in the background wall. The couples dance close together, their bodies curved and their backs arched as they describe sinuous steps. Two bearded and long-haired musicians provide musical accompaniment on bandoneon and guitar.

Although the novel was set in contemporary times, the scene shown here could have taken place as many as twenty years earlier, when the tango was still in its infancy and very much a forbidden pastime. The costumes and instruments of the musicians suggest as much. Neighborhood dances in less savory districts were alleged to include suggestive tango dancing, at the doorstep to sexual promiscuity. A Spanish visitor to Buenos Aires in 1915 succinctly summarized the attitude underlying the tango's proscription among the middle and upper classes: "The tango," he wrote, "is a very ancient dance. The only difference is that what was once danced lying down is now danced standing up."¹⁶ The novel's description of events that Bellocq illustrated also encapsulates upper-class suspicions of the dance:

This was sensuous music of the ghetto, of the unwashed, a mix of insolence and crudity, of stiffness and voluptuousness, of the worldly sadness and coarse pleasure of the whorehouse; music that spoke in the argot of the jail, and made one think of scenes of low life. . . . And to its heady and twisted airs, to its wafting sound which intoxicated like



Fig. 65.
Bellocq,
Tango Dance. 1922.
Zinc relief book
illustration,
9.5 × 13.5 cm.
In Manuel Gálvez,
Historia de Arrabal
(Buenos Aires:
Agencia General,
1922), p. 66.

strong wine and made the senses hazy, everyone on the patio danced. The couples moved with heavy slowness. They stooped, they stood, they twisted from side to side, they stepped stiffly upright, and at the end they paused to lean forward and then back in grotesque silhouettes, every man glued to his partner.¹⁷

The tango was probably still danced this way in some areas of the city when the novel was published in 1922, but by then it was already also a fixture of dance clubs, musical theater, and of the domestic middle-class salon.

In fact, neighborhood dances even in poor areas were not uniformly characterized by sensuous abandon in an atmosphere of sexual danger. It was



Fig. 66. Neighborhood Tango Dance, 1909. Photographer unknown. From Hector and Luis Bates, *Historia del Tango* (Buenos Aires: General Fabril, 1934).

common in many outdoor dances to prohibit the more sensual tango moves on pain of expulsion. One such decorous event was photographed as early as 1909 (fig. 66). Here we see couples dancing much more modestly, smiles on some of their faces, children lurking underfoot. Organizers of dances such as this commonly forbade two types of tango steps in particular: the *corte* (cut), a quick step between the partner's legs, and the *quebrada* (break), a suggestive pause accompanied by a tug at the partner. This photograph shows not the heady and decadent atmosphere suggested in the novel, but rather an upbeat neighborhood block party. In those more restricted environments, the tango evolved from a visual demonstration of sexual prowess to a true social dance.

Another way in which the tango spread in poor neighborhoods, and from there to more affluent districts, was by means of the *organito* or hand organ. Usually rented by new immigrants or handicapped persons who could hold no other job, the organito was stocked with cylinders that contained a selection of "milongas, polkas, mazurkas, habaneras, and tangos,

the latter increasing in popularity until they came to dominate over the other types."¹⁸ Organito players strolled through neighborhoods, generally accompanied by singing children, collecting stray coins as recompense for their serenades. The 1923 tango lyric *Organito de la Tarde* by José González Castillo described a sight that was apparently common enough in working-class neighborhoods:

As he passes slowly, a poor old man
Fills the town with music:
A concert like broken glasses
From his organito at sunset.
Turning over the crank,
The limping man rambles behind,
With his hard wooden leg
Marking the time of a tango.

Organitos first appeared in Buenos Aires in the 1870s, well before the tango did, but soon the tango took its place in the repertoire of the mechanical instruments. By the time Castillo composed this tango, organitos were probably beginning a decline ushered in by the advent of the radio.

José Arato made a sympathetic depiction in woodcut of a poor organito player (fig. 67). It was intended to illustrate an eponymous story by Leonidas Barletta, which was published in a collection for which Arato made several woodcut illustrations. According to the story, a peglegged veteran, wounded in the Chaco War, came to Buenos Aires to visit a cousin. He bought an organito, signing a contract for monthly payments that he was supposed to earn as he played. He had difficulty making the payments until he convinced a young boy named Jaime to drop out of school and accompany him on his outings, singing along with the instrument and begging after each song. Arato's illustration captures the shabby nobility of the poor performers: The player dominates the composition at the viewer's eye level, his hand cranking the off-center instrument. He is flanked by singing children who stand before a conventillo in a poor neighborhood whose other low-lying buildings are suggested in the upper left. The vertical lines of a sunset behind the protagonist's head lend a nostalgic glow.

Fig. 67.
 José Arato,
El Organillero,
 1925. Woodcut
 book illustration,
 10 × 13 cm.
 In Leonidas
 Barletta, *Los Pobres*
 (The Poor)
 (Buenos Aires:
 Editorial Claridad,
 1925), p. 26.



Facio also made tango dancing the subject of one lithograph from the series *Mala Vida* (fig. 68). Here we see not outdoor neighborhood leisure but an altogether more decadent interior scene. The couple at the right dances sinuously, the curves of their bodies suggesting slow, writhing motion. One dancer (presumably a male) clutches the buttocks of the other. The luminous glow of this region contrasts strongly with the deep shadows nearer the edges of the composition. In the center foreground, another figure in similarly clingy clothing displays backside anatomy. The guitarist at the left edge has a distorted countenance; at the right lower corner, a patron leans drunkenly at a table. The lack of a horizon line, the curving bodies in the work, and its sepulchral, uneven lighting suggest the deepest sorts of decadence ever associated with the tango.

The work is not dated, but it most likely comes from about 1928, after the artist gave up etching and devoted himself to lithography. This work is part of the series that dealt with criminals and vagabonds. His location of the tango in that company signals at least a profound ambivalence about the music that he heard and even participated in as the artists serenaded the neighborhood. Clearly Facio was suspicious of the tango as a phenomenon of popular culture that (he feared) enervated workers and distracted them from the more important struggles for economic equality. At one point he told



Fig. 68. Guillermo Facio Hebequer, *El Tango* from the series *La Mala Vida* (The Wretched Life), n.d. Lithograph, 40 × 40 cm.

Discepolín, paraphrasing Marx, "The tango is the opiate of the masses."¹⁹ In this belief he echoed the concerns of many Socialist Party leaders: "In the second half of that decade, they were disconcerted by the rise of new popular manifestations such as movies, the musical theater, vaudeville, the circus, and other spectacles under the rubric of 'diversions.'"²⁰ The rise of popular culture seemed to work against the socialists' and anarchists' efforts to "better" the workers by exposing them to higher culture and by keeping their minds fixed on the economic struggle. The Argentine Socialist Party, with its libraries, workers' clubs, singing societies, publishing houses, and even their own films and radio broadcasts, were trying to create a workers' culture in opposition to the business-oriented popular culture of capitalism, but the rise of popular culture in Buenos Aires in those years seemed to neutralize their efforts. Facio collaborated with these attempts at cultural betterment, lecturing at socialist clubs and exhibiting his works in their libraries, but both fought a losing battle against a rising tide that included the tango. Facio condemned the tango and other cultural forms in 1929 for allegedly making poetry and money from the human suffering of poor persons, converting the reality of the poor into entertainment:

There is no tango, nor song, nor musical show which does not evoke the arrabal or reproduce it in order to praise its customs or virtues. All the moral and material filth that the arrabal spits up, thanks to the work and graces of a pack of conscience-free poetasters and musicians, is converted into a type of wistful caramel which eases the boredom of the downtown folks.²¹

The domestication of this dance, and its transformation into one of the "diversions" that the socialists feared, was a counterproductive trend that Facio opposed. Hence he pictured the tango in a retrospective fashion, relocating it to the world of "low life" that gave it birth, and emphasizing its association with sexual passion, brothels, and drunkenness.

The legacy of Los Artistas del Pueblo as they confronted the tango is thus deeply contradictory. Even as they enjoyed hearing, playing, and singing the tango in their studio and in the streets, and even as Bellocq contributed to its popularization through his earlier work in the sheet-music shop, when the artists depicted the tango in their works, they did so in a way that left no

doubt about its earlier association with passion and prostitution. While they may have enjoyed the music, they could not find a place for it in their art of social struggle. They could not see even its more domesticated form as an example of positive popular culture.

The lyrics of Discepolín represent a more fruitful relationship with the tango as a popular art form; he worked within the realm of the popularized tango, and gave it a personal stamp of strong social comment that was unique for that period. The studio of Los Artistas nurtured him for ten important years ending when the poet was in his middle twenties, and deeply influenced his view of life: "The philosophy that plays out in my tangos," he wrote, "I learned in the streets, in life, in those bohemian years of my youth."²² Later, he found a way to use the tango for social ends that parallel in some ways those of the artists who nurtured him. In his lyrics, the art of social protest bursts into song.

Born to a musical family but orphaned at age nine, he lived with upper-class relatives until 1915, when he moved with his much older brother Armando to a house near Facio's studio. As he worked in acting jobs obtained through his brother's connections, he accompanied the artists on their musical rambles, and on their expeditions to the city's worst neighborhoods in search of models. Discepolín wrote some early plays (unpublished) that depicted the more colorful aspects of the bohemian life he knew in the Facio studio. After he moved away from that immediate circle in 1925, his creations began to show the influence of the sharp social critique and unsparing look at life that was also a feature of Los Artistas. He collaborated with his brother Armando on the 1925 short play *El Organito*, which dealt with a poor family's trials. Under the dominance of a tyrannical father, they live by begging and by playing an old and dilapidated hand organ that gave the play its name. At one point, the father delivers a cynical rant about why people contribute to organito players:

They give a handout, ostentatiously pulling a coin out of their pocket, but not in order to help me—if so, I would fall over dead—but in order to feel good about themselves, to wash away the sins they've committed, in hopes that Christ will see and take note in his book! And I don't thank them, because if charity really existed . . . there would not be any beggars in the world.²³

This short play also foreshadowed Discepolín's later tango lyrics in their bitter denunciation of a cynical world.

His first tango, *Biscochito* (The Little Biscuit) served as a number in a 1924 musical about a girl from the arrabal who reforms herself and marries out of poverty. But soon a far more sarcastic social vision asserted itself in Discepolín's writing. In the 1926 tango *¿Qué Vachaché?* (What will you do?), the poet heaps scorn on an unnamed heartless person who has enjoyed monetary success. The poem's heavy slang makes translation difficult:

What you've got to do is horde up your cash,
Sell off your soul, divide your heart for a raffle,
Throw out what little decency you have left,
For money, money, money, and evermore money.
This is how you earn your daily bread
And get friends, home, name, or whatever.
True love has drowned in the soup;
The belly is your king and the dollar your only god.

The musical in which this tango appeared soon failed, but the song became more widely known in the following year when Carlos Gardel recorded it, and radio stations began playing it. The song is a bitter denunciation of materialism during a time when the Argentine economy was the most prosperous in Latin America. It shares with the prints of *Los Artistas* a strong distrust of business culture and a sarcastic denunciation of social ills. We may see a parallel to this social denunciation in Adolfo Bellocq's *Mala Sed* (see fig. 21), where persons in many kinds of conveyances rush about madly in pursuit of wealth.

Discepolín collaborated with Filiberto on one work that was premiered in a tango festival in 1928, but the collaboration seemed to serve only to highlight the distance that had grown up between the two in the intervening years. *Malevaje* (The Gang) is the satirical rumination of a former street thug who has found that love softened up his heart. Meditating on his new more tender nature, he addresses his beloved in disbelief:

Tell me, for God's sake,
What have you done to me?

To leave me so changed
That I no longer even know myself.
The old gang, baffled,
Now stares uncomprehending
As I have lost the tough air
That formerly I exuded.

In the chorus the protagonist explains that he was seduced by the sensuous tango steps of the woman he addresses, so that he instantly lost all his courage and manhood. He sarcastically laments that all that is left for him is to now start going to church on Sundays. These ironic verses are out of keeping with the more tender lyrics that Filiberto generally sought for his tunes, as the example of *Caminito* shows. Filiberto had been mellowed by success, and was ready to join the orthodox popular culture of the tango as it trafficked in nostalgia and other tender feelings. Since Discepolín had no regular need of a melody writer—he generally composed his own tunes for his lyrics—it would be their only collaboration.

These tangos established a pattern for Discepolín's future songs. They took the form of philosophical soliloquies that piled up bitter imagery in prophetic denunciation. He had his first immediate hit later that year with *Esta Noche Me Emborracho* (Tonight I'm Getting Drunk). The lyric tells of the poet's sadness at seeing an old flame, ten years after the embers cooled, emerging from a bar on the arm of another. She now looks old and disheveled, and the narrator expresses shock at what she has become: "a plucked chicken/showing off to the gang/her blotchy flesh." The sight occasions ironic reflections on the ravages of time:

Time takes bitter revenge on you,
Forcing you to see laid waste
What once you loved.
The encounter has sickened me so much
That if I keep it in mind
I'll end up poisoning myself.
Tonight I'm getting drunk,
Drinking till I stumble
In order to stop my thoughts.

Carlos Gardel also recorded this song within a few months of its appearance, and it soon became a hit in the capital. (Many tangos by Discepolín were also issued as sheet music, but by then the hand-made illustration rendered by artists had given way to manufacture by photomechanical means.)

Capturing the bitter and resigned tone of the originals is difficult in translation, because Discepolín larded his songs with slang expressions from *lunfardo*, the argot of the lower classes. The level of discourse is that of an embittered person who has endured a sizable portion of suffering, and he lets his hair down in a tone of complaint and lament that was adventurous for its time. In fact, the government banned both *Esta Noche Me Emborracho* and the earlier *¿Qué Vachaché?* from the radio in early 1929, along with a third Discepolín lyric, *Chorra* (Thieving Woman). The banning was part of a wider effort to circumscribe public expression in *lunfardo*.²⁴ The Yrigoyen government gave the naval ministry charge of public communications, and its leaders were fervent in their struggle for decorousness. In April 1929, after control of radio shifted to the Interior Ministry, an ordinance demanded that stations "offer to the radio listener programs of a high cultural and artistic level," a standard that Discepolín's tangos apparently did not meet.²⁵

Undiscouraged, he continued to write bitter tunes that targeted a gradually wider social space with their cynical reproach. A lyric from later in that year condemns "The world's indifference/Its deafness and silence/Which you will soon feel . . . /Even when life breaks you/And pain gives you its bite/Don't ever expect any help / Not a hand, not a favor." He later recalled the feelings that caused him to compose it:

This tango was born in the street. It was inspired by the streets of Buenos Aires, the madness of Buenos Aires, the gaping loneliness of a person before his problems. . . . There is a hunger which is as great as the hunger for bread. It is the hunger caused by injustice and incomprehension. This hunger is created in large cities where one struggles alone, among millions of indifferent people, where one may shout with pain and no one will hear.²⁶

This complaint about the harshness of life resembles in some ways the early prints in Facio's series *Tu Historia, Compañero* (see figs. 56 and 58), where pain and misfortune seem to surround the subjects on every side. An important

difference between them, however, is that Discepolín's verse avoids consideration of social class. His tango lyrics are broader in their sweep as they appear to denounce the culture as a whole, whereas Facio sees social ills visited mostly on the poor.

The culmination of Discepolín's tangos of social denunciation came five years later with *Cambalache* (Junkshop), one of the best-known of all tangos:

That the world was and is a total mess, I already know it.
In the year 1506, and in 2000 as well . . .
Today it makes no difference
To be faithful or to be a traitor;
Ignorant, wise, thieving,
Generous, living by your wits—
All are equal, none is better:
Be a donkey or a great professor . . .
The twentieth century, what a junkshop:
Problematic and feverish.
He who doesn't cry goes hungry,
And he who doesn't steal is as good as dead.

This tango shares with Facio's prints the spirit of bitter social protest, but with the other important difference that Discepolín lacks the final optimism. His focus on the solitary individual confronting an indifferent and often hostile world left no place for the type of class-based, morale-building political action that Facio encouraged in *Tu Historia, Compañero*, and other print series. Although they were studio mates for some ten years over which Facio exercised gentle leadership, Discepolín evolved away toward a more hard-eyed realism. He described the transformation:

I am not ashamed to have passed through all the stages: at fifteen, I was writing very bad love verses. At twenty [when he was part of the studio], I felt that all men were my brothers. At thirty, hmm, they were barely my cousins.²⁷

This realism contributed to his ability to make use of the tango for his own artistic ends rather than hold it at bay as a threat, as the artists did. He was

thus able to reconcile the tango with social commentary more deeply than any other composer.

A somewhat ironic conclusion to this story comes with the death of Facio in 1935, the year of *Cambalache*. Obituaries for the printmaker poured forth in leftist publications of every stripe, and he was lauded as the true people's artist. He was also reconciled, after a fashion, with the Opiate of the Masses: at a concert given in his honor at the Buenos Aires city hall, the orchestra was that of Filiberto, and the program consisted of tangos.