

NOTES ON A CRITICAL EDITION OF  
*PARA LAS SEIS CUERDAS* BY JORGE LUIS BORGES

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Abstract

Jorge Luis Borges orchestrated the canonization of his work, culminating in his *Obras completas*. The traces of this editorial endeavor are effaced in what Borges conceived as his complete works. The analysis of the various editions of *Para las seis cuerdas* demonstrates that the rationale behind the editorial changes is a conscious effort to present a collection of *milongas* with a coherent vision of a homeric Argentinian past. Only a critical edition of Borgian texts would provide the basis for the study of the complex creative process and fissures in the canonic text which the author concealed in his *Obras completas*.

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Post-structuralist critics, authors like Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes or Jacques Derrida among others, have qualified the writings of Jorge Luis Borges as a landmark in 20th-Century literature. One of the most intriguing aspects of the Borgian text, which justifies this view, is that Borges subverts the traditional binary of author and reader. He questions – in emblematic form in the short story *Pierre Menard* – the originality or “authority” of the author and his alter ego, the narrative subject. At the same time Borges underscores the importance, the creativity and, above all, the power of the reader who is – to use an expression coined by Julio Cortázar – an “accomplice” in the literary process. Bearing this in mind, it is a paradox that Jorge Luis Borges himself consistently endeavored to determine the reception of his texts through interviews, prefaces and other paratexts by giving sometimes misleading clues for an orthodox interpretation.

The constitution of a canonical *œuvre* was an important factor in this project. The poems, essays and short-stories of Borges’s literary career, particularly before the 1950s, first appeared in journals before Borges selected and published them in modified versions. The process of canonization orchestrated by himself culminated with the *Obras completas*. Hence, *Obras completas* does not provide the reader and critic the “complete works” of Jorge Luis Borges, but rather reflects the outcome of complex intertextual operations. However, the numerous



revisions, omissions, amplifications, changes of organization of the material and paratextual strategies did not leave traces in the text authorized by Borges. To sum up: A critical edition of *Obras completas* which reflects the evolution of the Borgian text is still a desideratum.

The purpose of the present study is, on one hand, to elucidate the importance of critical editions of Borges's works. On the other hand, I want to supply an example of how a text of Borges, *Para las seis cuerdas*, evolved in subsequent editions. I argue that the modifications made by Borges cannot be dismissed as minor editorial revisions but are part of a strategy that endeavors to purge the text. The study of this strategy contributes to an understanding of the textual coherence of *Para las seis cuerdas*.

Unlike Borges's better-known works, *Para las seis cuerdas*, a collection of poetry, has been published in only four editions. The limited number of variants and the brevity of text allow the student of the text to discern the essential changes and describe them in a concise form.

The editio princeps of *Para las seis cuerdas* dates from 1965. The painter Héctor Basaldúa illustrated each of the eleven *milongas* of the poet with a charcoal and watercolor drawing. In the second edition of 1970 Borges eliminated the *milonga* *Alguién le dice al tango* and augmented the text, again with the collaboration of Basaldúa, with three new *milongas*: *Milonga de Albornoz*, *Milonga de Manuel Flores* and *Milonga de Calandria*. The author included *Para las seis cuerdas* in his *Obras completas*, the first volume of which was issued in 1974.<sup>1</sup> The most significant changes in this version were the omission of the poems *Buenos Aires* and *Los compadritos muertos* which were edited as parts of *El otro, el mismo* (325, 328). In 1996, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Borges's death, Emecé Editores presented the third edition of *Para las seis cuerdas* as an independent text. The editors included once more *Alguién le dice al tango* and expanded the text with *Milonga del forastero*, *Milonga de Juan Muraña*, *Milonga del infiel* and *Milonga del muerto*, first published between 1977 and 1985. Emilio Basaldúa contributed drawings he had inherited from his father.

*Para las seis cuerdas* is a collection of *milongas*, a kind of popular music of the Río de la Plata region, which is similar to the Sevillian *saeta*. In the prologue to all editions of the text Borges suggests that:

El lector debe suplir la música ausente por la imagen de un hombre que canturrea, en el umbral de su zaguán o en un almacén, acompañándose con la guitarra. La mano se demora en las cuerdas y las palabras cuentan menos que los acordes.<sup>2</sup>

Although the author underscores the musicality of his *milongas*, the most salient feature of his book lies in its thematic coherence. The reader encounters poems about personages of the Argentinian civil wars, of the Pampa and the suburbs of 19th-Century Buenos Aires. Borges evokes

a lost world of *negros, mulatos, gauchos* and *compadritos*. The analysis of the editorial evolution of *Para las seis cuerdas* reveals an important aspect of most of Borges's *milongas*.

Apart from the added *milongas*, the most significant change in the second edition is the elimination of *Alguién le dice al tango*, the only *milonga* Borges did not include in his *Obras completas*. In this poem the lyric subject is part and "protagonist" of the world evoked: "he visto bailar", "yo también he sido", "yo habré muerto", "nuestra vida" (s. p.). In *Milonga de Don Nicanor Paredes* Borges also deleted an entire stanza in which the lyric subject presents himself as part of the diegetic universe:

A un peleador le pidió  
(Yo estaba allí) con un dejo  
De dulzura y de humildá:  
"hágale un tajo a este viejo". (s. p.)

Borges employs the same strategy in the edition of *Obras completas*. In *Milonga de Calandria* he purged a stanza with a reference to the lyric subject:

A orillas del Uruguay  
Me acuerdo de aquel matrero  
que lo atravesó, prendido  
de la cola de su overo. (s. p.)<sup>3</sup>

In *Obras completas* Borges eliminates the poem *Buenos Aires* in which the lyric subject is, together with the city, the focus of the poem. This speaker expresses his subjective and present impressions:

Y la ciudad, ahora, es como un plano  
De mis humillaciones y fracasos;  
Desde esa puerta he visto los ocasos  
Y ante ese mármol he aguardado en vano. (s. p.)

*Los compadritos muertos*, the second text omitted in *Obras completas*, also gives a presentist vision of the world evoked:

Perdurán en apócrifas historias  
En un modo de andar, en el rasguido  
De una cuerda, en un rostro, en un silbido  
...  
Cuando un tango embravece la guitarra. (s. p.)

The revisions in *Para las seis cuerdas* are clearly more than mere editing of textual imperfections: Borges makes an obvious attempt to present a homogeneous collection as regards the vision of the world

described in the poems. The *milongas* of *Obras completas* evoke a Homeric past from the point of view of a lyric subject that glorifies *gauchos*, soldiers and *compadritos*. The title of the poem *¿Dónde se habrán ido?* could be a motto for *Para las seis cuerdas*. In the revisions following *editio princeps* Borges showed a tendency to eliminate poems and passages which do not conform to this focus of *ubi sunt*.

Borges left one *milonga*, *Quien le dice al tango*, out of his *Obras completas*. Others (*Buenos Aires* and *Los compadritos muertos*) were included in collections the author evidently considered a better context. Borges clearly never intended to present his "Las milongas completas" in the process of the reëditions of *Para las seis cuerdas*. The decision of the most recent editors to consider poems Borges had excluded, and to add *milongas* the author had written later, obfuscates the "intratextual" practice of Borges which only a critical edition could elucidate.

#### Notes

1. *Buenos Aires* appears next to the poem of the same title.
2. The first and second editions are not paginated. The prologue is reproduced in *Obras completas* (II, 329).
3. The passage is nearly identical with a stanza from *Milonga para los orientales*:

A villas del Uruguay,  
Me acuerdo de aquel matrero  
Que lo atravesó, prendido  
De la cola de su overo. (s. p.)

#### Works Cited

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