

Review of Platform by Rodrigo Toscano | Kasey Mohammad

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Rodrigo Toscano's *Platform* (Atelos, 2003) got **eight** mentions from contributors to Steve's [group list](#) of noteworthy poetic texts published in the last two or three years. If I hadn't limited my list to chapbooks and other ISBN-less items, it would have been on my list too (and by the way, Kent Johnson's *Miseries of Poetry* would have brought my list up to the requested eleven items if I hadn't been under the mistaken impression that it had an ISBN).

Platform is a "difficult" text, in the classic Brechtian sense: it throws you curves at every turn, defeating the smallest and most reasonable expectations of fluidity, closure, equilibrium ... all the stock elements of readerly familiarity and comfort. So what, you may already be thinking, every other "post-language" poet out there writes like that. But one of the things that distinguishes Toscano's work is an effect running throughout the poems which I can only describe as his *passionate voice*. Both these terms, *passion* and *voice*, are bound to evoke associations with old-fashioned expressivist/romanticist tropes of individualist experience, but what Toscano does here is something altogether different. *Passion* means suffering, experiencing, having something happen to one (as an offshoot of this meaning, it refers to Christ's sufferings on the cross).

Having just written the above text and feeling stalled with it, I resorted to a little voodoo-review trick I sometimes pull out when I'm stuck: I searched through the text to see if Toscano himself ever uses the word in question, with the hope of making some demonstrative close-reading point. Here's the passage I landed on, from "Eight Struggling Voices, Now Barely Struggling at All (An All Instrumental Version)" (the title itself relates perfectly to the way I'm thinking about *voice*, but I haven't gotten to that point yet):

["]word-of-mouth wise I tell you, my Fellow Americans

my private parts have less patience for
tracing the lines of material causality back to an exploitative

Gemeinschaftlichkeit

than

the most broken-down of you has

a passion

for pass-or-fail

education

to restore respect

for full bore

devolution

of social provision"

This is the third of the eight "voices," a "'bi-partisan' wing nut," as the subtitle refers to him (or her? probably not). The "passion" here is viciously ironic, used as a euphemism for sheer blinkered self-destructive ignorance. (It takes some work and/or coin-tossing to decide how the grammar of passages like this one should be read—I'm assuming that the page break between "to restore respect" and "for full bore" coincides with space between lines, so that "for" in "for full bore" is apposite to "for" in "for pass-or-fail," rather than connecting to "respect.") Or is it? Is it even sensible to venture anywhere near paraphrase? This is where those New Critical methods of close reading I was talking about in an earlier post lose their power: part of what this kind of poetry depends on is a letting-go of referential handrails, at the same time that it supposes a level of theoretical/political knowledge with very determinate references attached to it. For instance, after going to look up "gemeinschaftlichkeit" (ideologically imagined "commonality" of blood, labor, social purpose, etc., in a Hegelian/Marxist context), one is only slightly more able to "understand" the poem's speaker. The immediate poetic precedent that comes to mind for this sort of writing is Pound: send 'em to the encyclopedia so they can find out how inadequate the encyclopedia is, and by the time they've tracked down a decoder in some obscure library, they may have forgotten that the original point was to understand a poem, and instead they've got some KULCHUR. The poem takes you outside the poem (and may ditch you there, sans passport), rather than wrapping you into a warm, self-contained cushion of explainedness.

So back to passion and voice: “passion” is figured in this passage, I was saying, ironically, as a numb willingness to be acted upon, screwed over. This ironic tone is dominant in the book as a whole, and plays, I think, into the idea of negativity I picked up on after **Ron** a few days ago. Actually, Rodrigo himself is the first person I remember using the term “negativity” in a poetic context (I understand Barrett Watten has a whole section on negativity in *The Constructivist Moment*). So where and when do we get to an active passion (etymological oxymoron?), a passionate poetic voice? Well, what we get are tortured *plural* voices, very conspicuously presented as physical voices—that is, as clusters of sound and talk and noise—emanating from a human body or bodies. Sometimes the body in question is a single subject, sometimes it’s a mob of disgruntled laborers, and sometimes it’s a disembodied talking head spewing false consciousness over the airwaves. Toscano’s trick, however, is to bind these voices into an “interior” dialogue, a competing, querying, quarrel of communicative gestures. Sometimes, as in the above example, the voices are clearly not the poet’s own, but they are always traceable back to the poet’s active, activist concerns, and are thus vividly portrayed as extensions projected out of the mobile platform of the poet’s own consciousness. He sets up little vocal dramas, like Dickens’ Sloppy doing the police in different voices, or like Milton (whom he quotes in *Platform*) with his Father/Son/Holy Spirit finger-pupper act. These dramas are characterized by frequent use of question marks, creating the effect of the speaker(s) being continually uncertain, dissatisfied, incredulous, outraged:

Like being reassigned to a case being made—to win?

for a world
mocked-up—terms
to contest?

Or, *self* glutting the market of experience—

am am, a
did this that—
as “voice” script?

Or, reining in the thrusting impulse that’d *burst—out!*

and into...
timed pattern
a male's—"mine?"

(from "Early Morning Prompts for Evening Takes Or, Roll 'em!")

This start-and-stop self-interrogation routine really gets under your skin. I find myself sometimes silently responding to daily experience in Toscanoese, thinking in those lurching counter-rhythms. His coinages have also colonized my brain: I think "unfuckinrightgaggable" and "flimsidarity" on a regular basis now.

Just as Pound's ancient oracular bray seems inseparable now from the printed text of the *Cantos*, it may help, as a way of getting a fix on the cadences of Toscano's work, to have seen/heard him read, so do so if you get a chance. Alternately hyperactive, lyrical, shrill, booming, angry, playful, official-sounding, and a hundred other registers (sometimes all in the course of one sentence!), he is more successful than any other poet I've seen in combining highly "textual" experimental writing with "spoken-word" vocal theatrics.

Kasey Mohammad, July 21, 2003