

Rodrigo Toscano

Unzips Three Questions on Poetics

What can a poem do?

Some people have resorted to talking to potatoes out of loneliness. Did the potato need a poetic character to be so convivial?

Someone in jail might have subsisted (mentally) on a single poem, or someone laboring under disease might claim that a particular poem helps ease the torment.

And yet, we (assembled here) might find that particular poem “wanting” in its conception, its execution, be it religious or secular, Hebraic or Qur’anic, Stoic or Cynic, Nationalist or Internationalist.

The one-hundred-thousand strong 1st and 4th Red Armies marching across China, swerving this way and that, over frigid mountain ranges, across treacherous rivers, in such-and-such combat formation, half-starved—strings of words, vectors penned by Mao himself (in rather archaic poetic forms), memorized, recited out loud, acted on.

Kids have been known to OD in solemn celebration of a particular poem.

People around the world have recited poetic charms so that the sun and the moon get out of each other’s way ... what did *those* poems achieve?

A social order (bolstered) of course is the shorthand answer, but let’s remain (or pretend to remain, for now) a little *under* “achieved.”

Neruda’s verses, under the cover of night, hastily scrawled onto crumbling cinderblock walls over much of the world; an Elouard poem printed onto leaflets dropped by the RAF over the Paris metro area during the occupation. Has there been any kind of sustained study as to the aggregate effect of that poem, or *any* individual poem for that matter?

But it stands, and it’s a good question. “What can a poem do?”

And what can the Koran do? “Oh, but that’s a ‘compilation!’”

And what of the Aramaic-to-Greek evangelical “compilations?”

Tyndale¹—was one hell of a poet!

What wretch penned the *Horst Wessel*² song?

¹ Tyndale, William c. 1494-1536. English theologian, born in Gloucestershire. Tyndale determined to translate the Bible into English, returning to Greek and Hebrew sources. His sharp, lucid English style set the character for every translation that followed. Arrested by imperial authorities in Antwerp in 1535, Tyndale was tried on a charge of heresy and condemned to the stake. He believed that scripture should be available even to “*a boy that driveth the plough.*”

Was it an “effective” poem? I’d say yes.

And so was the *Internationale*.

Ok ... so, it appears that the “sphere of consequence” is more determinative than any singular poem (surprise) ... and that a *critical mass* of poems is necessary for the “life” of “a poem.”

And do I write one poem at a time? I don’t think I do in the end. I mean *literally* I do, and I feel “I must,” yet I am aware that I am simultaneously operating in (but more importantly, on) multiple cultures of poem writing.

I wouldn’t mind, throughout the next 10 years, to read or better yet, hear *you* recite your next ... 150 poems.

Wait, don’t run away. Isn’t this what you wanted?

Historical Materialists have long said that poems act as a barometer of one’s developing social consciousness ... I would agree with that.

In order to better determine how one’s consciousness has changed throughout the years—or months, sometimes, even days—this ideological-interfacing called poetry, as measured through one poem at a time, can be a rather *nifty* thing.

What’s demonstrating? What’s counter-demonstrating, clarifying, befuddling, attracting, repelling, delighting, disconcerting?

Something burst overhead just now, like orange fireworks, pungent scraps of green impulses raining down...

Can poetry challenge militarized language and propaganda?

I think so. For example, what if the poets who appeared in the *War and Peace* anthology³ were given the chance to read widely on the radio⁴ or on TV, say, once a week, for two months straight. Before the pundits, or after the pundits, or during. I think many people listening might be less intimidated by (as Jameson coined it) the “prison-house of language” that Corporate America has set up for us. And perhaps this newfound boldness would not only be acquired by the poems being frontally resistant (though certainly that, too), but also by their swerving around obvious traps, or slinking into and out of complex social spaces, or perhaps by focusing on strange new life constructions, and testing them in even stranger ways.

² “Horst Wessel” was the official song of the Nazi Party, and the unofficial national anthem of Germany during the Third Reich.

³ *War & Peace*, published by O Books, 2004, http://www.obooks.com/books/war_peace.htm

⁴ Two important developments since the writing of this statement are two new poetry-positive radio shows: *Cross-Cultural Poetics Program*, KAOS-FM, Olympia, Washington, hosted by Leonard Schwartz, http://kaos.evergreen.edu/programs/cc_poetics.html, and *Tangent Radio’s “Poetry and Politics,”* KWCW, 90.5 FM, Walla Walla, WA, hosted By Jules Boykoff and Kaia Sand, <http://www.thetangentpress.org/>.

But that's *if*... which, for now, isn't the case. Such (public) recognition of poets as legitimate arbiters of any slice of collective social consciousness is slow in coming (at least in the U.S.).

So let's for a moment jump to another social arena, perhaps one more currently available to us. If you listen to the mantras of the Right, you've no doubt heard how "deeply concerned" Americans should be about the Left presence (or supposed "Left dominance") in the universities. And how that spills out onto the larger national culture as corruption. I am truly heartened that the Left has not ceded these institutional spaces, and that many of my friends have landed positions in the University, and that they're now in the process of enabling people to come and speak, relaying social materials from other arenas. (Though the question remains, of course, who in fact is attending—*is able* to attend The U, given the increasing for-profit status of that institution, and are those populations really disposed to upset the power structure?)

Still, I am one with newfound access to these social locales. One who, although for various reasons didn't attend the University, has striven to craft a writing practice that weighs in on the same ideological struggles that my compeers there are involved in. So that by cross-infusing different loci of inter-related struggles, we can, hopefully, together *multilaterally* challenge what the "proper" role of the poet or the poem "is," or can be, at any given time.

The best thing that poets did for me at a young age (before I tinkered with writing poetry myself) was to demonstrate how the (so-called) "proper" social role was a form of social control that also depended on linguistic constructions, and that those roles could be challenged; that poetry with politics combined could be the *full install*. Worldwide "Post"-Colonial *writing* movements (Black Arts, Feminist, Chicano/Nuyorican, and others in the U.S.) emphasized *critical-expressive* moments in their respective *cultural* movements. While other poetic movements, such as Language and Post-Language poetries (yes, in the main white, *and* politically conscious) emphasized leaving plenty of *uninstall* (anti-institutional) buttons in their *critical-textual* work. And if you toss the whole New York School and Beat Thing in there, maybe (by now) we can begin to imagine a *continual synthesis* of all that, the outlines of a new internationally committed political poetry, with enough negativity and critical reflexivity to last into the night.

So what are the numbers of people who can be reached at readings? A rough estimate, say, for a (busy) poet doing multiple readings, might be as high as 200 to 300 people per year. And that's just a single poet. Therefore, the number might be as high as 9,000, taking the number of poets present here [at the Conference, approximately 34 writers]. That's more people than attended the founding convention of the Labor Party⁵ some years back, which was years in the planning. What's more, represented here, today, is but a *fraction* of our respective (interlocking) poetry communities. And so sometimes it does very much irk me to hear people say that, as poets, we are "ineffective" activists and that we exist only for each other. As many may already know, I spent a good portion of my life being an activist in different social arenas, all the while trying to maintain an active writing life—sacrificing a lot of writing, in fact, to that activist life. And I witnessed or was part of many triumphs and many more defeats. At one point I remember losing three whole years of writing poetry. Poof!—just like that. But some six years ago, I found myself *re-committing* to being an activist *within* culture, as *through* culture, because of an overall, comparative calculation as to its effectiveness in expanding our social horizons. But don't take it from me ... listen to our "concerned" enemies.

⁵ The Labor Party was founded in June 1996 at a convention of 1,400 delegates from hundreds of local and international unions, as well as individual activists. The party focuses on issues most important to working people—trade, health care, education, civil rights, and the right to organize, bargain, and strike.

So, can poetry challenge militarized language and propaganda?

Yes, in an overt confluence with other social movements, it has a potential to, though it's also paramount that we talk in the way we need to talk and no one else's. Forces abound, even friendly ones that tell us to stay in our places, august though those "places" may be. But as the band *Rage against the Machine* put it—"don't give us the key, we'll break it"

Are textual critique, parody, and satire adequate responses or do they reify these abuses?

Social abuses are social abuses, whether satirical, literal, parodic, meta-referential, what have you. How could there be a resolute answer as regards Parody or Satire or any other basic aspect of language expression? I mean, in the vocabulary of an active dramatist, the Humble Haikuist is as much a rhetorician, as much a *theatricalizer*, as the Mad Slammer.

Perhaps we should *ask* each other more often about all of our works, their treatments of contradictions within social relations or aesthetic meanings, or basic dispositions toward the audience, and importantly too, ask non-poets whom we read to, something we rarely do. Now *there's* a rotting front tooth worth pulling! And how much do each of us risk a less than perfect smile to *artistic encephalitis*.

Bumper sticker: "How am I troping?"

That "voice" is "dead," that "textual critique" is "cryptic," or that "lyric" or "narrative" is essentially "passé"—such pieties I want to continuously shed.

What might "reify" social abuses more than a specific genre or expressive modality is a practice of sitting pretty, clutching some tried-and-true method of yore, effective though it was then, now turned to froth. So this endless being hunted by froth. It might behoove us (resolute word-workers) to better understand *froth* in multiple dimensions.

And yes, it's all too true, that we're sinking into a kind of fascism in this country, a kind not encountered before. So my desire is to get serious (with you) about some sort of United Front. Of course, "United Front" doesn't mean the artificial cessation of contradictions between us, in what we each do. But that we need to articulate those contradictions openly, while moving towards the *resilient joy* of a common struggle.

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This essay was adapted from a statement presented at "Poetry and Empire: Post-Invasion Poetics," University of Pennsylvania, October 17-19, 2003, at which the questions/prompts were originally given to each participating panelist. For more information about the event, visit <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/poetics-weekend/ICA.html>.

Rodrigo Toscano's two latest books are *To Leveling Swerve* (Krupskaya Books, 2004), and *Platform* (Atelos, 2003). His work has recently appeared in *Best American Poetry 2004* (Scribner's) and *War and Peace* (O Books, 2004). He was a recent participant in "Diasporic

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