

Ioan Davies Memorial Lecture introduction, June 2006

Jody Berland

This brief tribute to Ioan Davies was almost a talk about his library. I recently had the poignant pleasure of visiting Ioan's study and helping to sort his books. I planned to talk about his library not only because it is a singular and wonderful collection of books that the university would be wise to acquire and turn into a reading room for graduate students, but because I was so intrigued and moved by the way the books spoke to one another on the shelves. The words seemed to ricochet across the shelves and we, Caitlin and I, sometimes felt the need to duck. But I got waylaid by one of Ioan's own books. Today I invite you to revisit with me his eloquent and prescient book, *Writers in Prison*, published in 1990.

In his introduction to *Writers in Prison*, the author, who lived in a number of countries and traveled to many more, relates his experience as that of an outsider with a voyeuristic relation to the cultures through which he traveled. Every country was a potential home but he could never be at home, he wrote, for he was the product of "a peripatetic culture whose mission had ended with the collapse of the old European empires."

Living as we do in the tightening grip of a newer empire, it seems romantic to contemplate the collapse of the old ones. Imagine the sense of hitting inadvertently against barriers you had not expected and cannot traverse, and the description comes closer to home. There is nothing romantic in Davies' reminder that the 20th century produced not only more scientists but also more prisoners than in all previous centuries combined. *Writers in Prison* addresses the larger relationship between incarceration and terror, and explores a dazzling array of writings produced within its spaces. And what a timely topic this is today.

Writers in Prison shows that the experience of terror and incarceration is not the end of the story but the beginning of it. For prison is, among other things, a school for writers. The prisoner lives on the margins of her society, and the writer in prison lives on the margin of his prison culture. The act of writing translates the oral cultures of stories and songs, the secret archives and everyday situations that circulate among these spaces into an act of personal and collective significance. This text-making draws on a combination of diverse but socially definite experiences: entering a place of terror, the shock of estrangement and recognition, negotiating life with a community and social structure into which one willy nilly enters, the filling of time with stories and silences, finding inspiration from books, discovering ways to express the experience of deep resistance and dispossession.

“There is a community of prisoners – across the centuries – of which we are all a part,” Davies suggests. And citing Camus: “We all carry within us our places of exile, our crimes and our ravages. But our task is not to unleash them on the world; it is to fight them in ourselves and others. Rebellion, the secular will not to surrender ... is still today at the basis of the struggle. Origin of form, source of real life, it keeps us always erect in the savage formless movement of writing.”

To talk about writing, especially in the presence of writers with such great talent for writing, is already to talk about inspiration and hope. It is also to speak of reading, of Davies reading Camus and me reading Davies, for instance (and only the eagerness to hear tonight’s speaker prevents me from enumerating others) and to celebrate the richness of these passages in which prisoners, philosophers, literary giants and ordinary letter-writers speak. It is to reflect on the savoury practice of reading in which words echo powerfully from one century to another, skipping like stones into the

present, and then to begrudge the endless pressures and diversions that keep us from them.

There is a special delight in tracing these texts backwards, and seeing the way that writers speak to one another within and across their times. Ioan's book reminds us how closely delight and hazard work together. The writers gathered here say that we will only recognize ourselves when we force into consciousness the various intellectual and social prisons in which we find ourselves. They say that there is a kinetic aspect to living in and surviving prisons, that these are lives lived by real bodies in real confined spaces. They say that narrative is a way of playing out the experience and meaning of imprisonment, posing questions that we must go on answering, because otherwise, we are never free of them. They say that we live in a time of growing institutional repression and public violence, and they ask us what we want to do about it.

Writers in Prison explores the architectonics of terror and resistance. Recalling this work proposes that there is no truth without anger and no hope without rebellion. It suggests that the pleasure of narrative is frivolous without passage through the various planes of earthly hell and that we have choices in how we respond to the horrors of history. One of these, Ioan writes, "is amnesic, another is politically utilitarian, another is a conscious cultural regrouping, and a final one... is a rethinking and retelling of what survival means." (204). Those of us luxuriously past survival seek the further step of citizenship. If we in this room are not prisoners in any legal or physical sense, if we rightly abhor the indulgence of metaphorizing our situation in relation to such prisoners, it is nonetheless true that as teachers, scholars, and witnesses to history, we have a responsibility to recall their

plight. As the reach of terror and incarceration spreads, as we watch the growing empire of camps and see prisoners with rights turn into detainees without rights, as we watch globalization move backwards so that the most unfree of governments extend their tactics across the globe, and rights generally – whether those of authors, users, prisoners, scholars or citizens -- are shrink-rapped and sold to the highest bidders, we need to acknowledge how close to them and their situation we could easily find ourselves. For us, as for them, writing words of truth are key to meaningful survival.

In my first of two memorial talks I recalled the energy and inspiration Ioan found in communities of people working together at kitchen tables. To do justice to his work, we must also recall the forces that inspire and confound such collaborations; the increasingly rigid corporate and institutional enclosures framing our lives and work, the increasingly pecuniary manipulation of talent; the countless forms of complicity through which we learn to live with censorship, militarization, dispossession, racism, violence, and other forms of neo-imperial power.

Following Ioan's example, I ask you once again to remember that words can do more than they have to; that writing is about much more than words; that scholarship can produce much more than useful information; that the bridges we seek can build more than data bases and research accounts, and that communities of scholars can generate energies, connections and hopes for change that may be much more than our present institutions want or need. I close with Goethe's remark that "Everything has been thought of, the difficulty is in thinking of it again."