

PEN Adelaide

International Day of the Imprisoned Writer

15 November 2007

J M Coetzee

PEN – Poets, Essayists and Novelists – was founded in the 1920s, in the aftermath of World War One. The charter of the organization, penned by the (mainly British) poets, essayists and novelists who came together to found it, expresses aims that can still resonate with us, even if to our ears their words carry overtones of a genteel and perhaps even quaint, other-worldly idealism: In times of war, works of art and libraries should be left untouched by national or political passions; In order that the world progress toward a higher political and economic order, writers should be free to criticize government; Members of PEN will pledge themselves to refrain from distorting the facts for political ends (what we could call today spinning the facts).

Since the 1920s the spotlight has gradually shifted from poets, essayists and novelists and fallen more squarely on editors and journalists. It is journalists and, to a lesser extent, editors who today have to bear the brunt of the wrath of the state when they expose uncomfortable truths or (as the state prefers to see it) tell lies or distort the facts.

In their private and even in their professional lives, journalists are no better than anyone else when it comes to telling the truth.

Furthermore, the kind of truth that is aimed for in reportage is distinctly different from the kind of truth that poets, novelists or even essayists aim for. Nevertheless, whether despite themselves or whether under the pressure of events, there have been journalists in our times who have revealed themselves to be authentic heroes of and martyrs for the truth.

The proof of this claim is a simple one. Why else would so many journalists find themselves being harassed by the police as they go about their business; or having their offices turned upside down by shadowy state operatives; or being hustled onto a plane in the middle of the night by immigration officers; or being served out of the blue with indictments for breaching state security; or disappearing into police cells and emerging hours later with bruised faces and broken fingers; or winding up in some godforsaken penitentiary for a year, two years, five years, ten years, twenty years for having committed hazy-sounding crimes against the state or against the people or against the nation; or, finally, lying dead on a footpath with a bullet through the head?

That is why we are here today. That is why, in cities across the world on the 15th of November each year, crowds of concerned people assemble, by their presence signalling to the police and plainclothes operatives and immigration officers and prosecutors and judges in question, and to the politicians behind them, that the persecution of writers, including journalists and editors, is repellent to us. To our elected representatives and our diplomats abroad we also, hereby, give expression to our concern. We ask them to use their office to speak to the foreign powers practising such persecution, urging them to cease and desist.

Foreign powers, I said. Let me be specific. Let me talk about China. There are, at this moment, members of the PEN independent centre in

China who are serving lengthy prison sentences whose justification the Chinese authorities say we non-Chinese don't understand but which we say we understand all too well, and reject. Specifically I refer to YANG Tongyan (12 year sentence), ZHANG Lin (five years), ZHANG Jianhong (six years), YAN Zhengzue (three years); also to the president of the PEN centre, LIU Xiaobo (house arrest). And with these five names I merely stir the surface of the wretched matter of limitations on free speech in China.

Foreign powers. I refer to writers in prison or on trial for their writings in the following nineteen countries: Algeria, Bangladesh, Belarus, Burma, Cameroon, Colombia, Cuba, Egypt, Iran, the Maldives, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.

In many of these countries the leverage that Australian diplomacy can exert is minimal. But in half a dozen cases these are countries with which we have friendly relations, or at least commercial relations. In these cases we urge our diplomats to let no occasion pass to remind their hosts of our serious concern, the serious concern of the informed Australian public.

At the very least, by gathering here today, we are sending a signal to the writers in question, some of them languishing in jail, that we are thinking of them and are in solidarity with them. We look forward to the day when they can be free again to resume their important work. We undertake to do what we can to advance that day.

Finally, though with mixed feelings, we ask these writers, who are today harassed, prosecuted or imprisoned, to undertake to lend us their support in return, should it ever come to pass in the future that

Australian journalists and editors, Australian writers in general, have to pass through their dark night.

For, I remind them and remind those of you gathered here today, the relevant laws are already on Australia's statute books. I refer to the new laws relating to terrorism. For the offence of publishing certain facts, facts that we know to be true, we too can taste the experience of being woken in the middle of the night and hustled off to jail. It hasn't happened yet, thank God, but when it does, if it does, I trust that our colleagues in Algeria and Burma and China and all the other benighted countries where the freedom to publish or broadcast or otherwise disseminate the truth is being strangled by the state will stand up to give us their support too.

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