

## Concrete Expressions

**The Mechanics' Institute Review, Issue 7  
September 2010**

What is exile? Ask first – what is a prison? Most of us know part of the answer. The concrete part: the physical cell, sometimes isolation, sometimes torture, the solitary confinement, the weeks, months, sometimes years without paper or pen or a book to read, the physical conditions, which could be anything at all.

What does a writer lose inside these walls? In most cases the right to create; that is, the right to transform their imagination and ethics and beliefs into a concrete expression. I use this phrase – concrete expression – intentionally. Pages not written are as real as the prison in which the writer is held. Far more real. A prison is only concrete or stone. It is a defensive structure designed to prevent the expression of creativity. Its tools are artificial isolation and the likelihood of suffering, imposed in a variety of ways. This includes the possibility of the ultimate isolation of death.

Freedom to speak and be heard, freedom to write and be read is an equally concrete reality. But it is the opposite of a prison, in part because it is an offensive structure. A book multiplies its force with each reader.

Prisons are a world of internal exile for almost everyone there, even the staff. These buildings come in an endless variety of forms. Many are built to resemble fanciful Renaissance castles or palaces on the outside. Some are surrounded by large formal gardens. After all, the labour is cheap. Some prisons limit rather than refuse the expression of creativity. They are satisfied with the physical punishment of confinement and the removal of individual dignity. Some writers are imprisoned without the concrete walls. They are restricted to their homes or simply left alone, provided they betray no public signs of writing. In some countries there is scarcely any need for prisons, at least as far as writers are concerned. The very suggestion that someone was writing would bring about their death.

At the opposite extreme, in countries devoted to freedom of expression, and equipped with elaborate publishing and distribution systems, there are nevertheless equally complex corporate systems which can make the reality of this freedom far less than it appears to be. They may, for example, shift the weight of publication and sales to the most commercial of books. Newer, more virtual forms of communication may normalise, even egalise the stealing of royalties.

True, these are fights that can be fought without lives being lost. But, the question must be asked – do such systems constitute a form of soft exile? You could certainly argue that real language – the language of communication – if it is rendered powerless by the forces of populism, has been cut off from its reality. And so yes, for a writer or indeed for a civilisation, this is a form of profound exile. A society that cannot speak to itself because of the forces of commerce and populism has been walled up, cut off from itself. This is a form of societal illiteracy. Worse still, this illiteracy is both written and oral. After all, what is most advertising if not an oral and visual talent for illiteracy?

But for writers in many countries, such limitations are little more than middle-class luxuries. In their reality there are concrete prisons designed to physically and mentally destroy the prisoner,

I was once helicoptered in Siberia from Salekhard over the tundra to look at the remains of Construction Camp 501, one of the most terrible of the Stalinist labour camps. This was perhaps the ultimate example of post-Second World War exile. The task given the prisoners was to build a railroad across the tundra, more or less along the shore of the Arctic Ocean. But tundra is a blend of earth and ice and so is constantly heaving. From the air you could see the rail line buckling wildly in every direction. There had never been any chance of a functioning railway. The whole project had been invented to occupy and physically destroy the prisoners who worked either in impossible cold or while being devoured by clouds of mosquitoes and black flies.

The philosophical theory of the camp could be seen in the engineering and social structures. The exiles lived in long, low, narrow barracks. They were simple wooden structures. No attempt had been made at isolation. The floors were laid straight onto the tundra, not raised on any sort of poles. You entered at one end on the left side. Immediately on the right was a fireplace. The only one. Down the entire right side ran two layers of shelving. These were the bunks. The lower bunk was a few centimetres off the floor, thus only a few extra centimetres off the tundra. The fireplace opened at the end of the upper bunk. As for the prisoners, there were two categories. The vast majority were considered to be political or intellectual, and therefore more or less writers. There was also a small group of hardened criminals. These professionals were the effective camp monitors. They ran the intellectuals by brute force. And they controlled the upper bunk at the fireplace end in each cabin. The less crudely physical you were, the further down at the other end and on the lower level you were.

And so you grew sick and died. There was no need to apply capital punishment for thinking and writing.

It was to the same area around Salekhard that earlier Czarist regimes had sent the Sons of Freedom, a Doukhobor sect, considered enemies of the state in part because they were pacifists. In 1899, Tolstoy, a writer no Russian regime felt it could touch, used the royalties from his last novel – *Resurrection* – to extricate them from their prison exile and sent eight thousand to Canada. This was a new exile, much farther from home, and yet an exile of freedom.

In this astonishing movement of a religious minority from one exile to another, thanks to a famous writer using his freedom of speech and the income it produced to make everything happen, you can see all the contradictory elements of exile, whatever the conditions, willing or forced, to freedom or prison.

To this must be added one more reality: even physical freedom can represent a new kind of emotional and intellectual prison. Few people leave their homes, their culture, unless poverty or political limitations force them. But there will almost always exist a minority of people who have the inner force to choose to go when they don't need to. Why? Because they feel constrained in a variety of ways. With a certain condescension, or a tip of the hat to romanticism, we often call this seeking adventure. But it is more likely about answering the inner need for a kind of freedom particular to that individual. This is the chosen exile: the pure existential act of a life changed.

For the others, there is no real choice. And yet, even if forced into exile, the capacity to begin again requires both courage and consciousness. I often think that Canada and other immigrant civilisations have been built thanks to the stupidity of foreign governments that have forced

## Concrete Expressions