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Poetry in Exile

Czech Poets during the Cold War and the Western Poetic Tradition

Josef Hrdlička

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Introduction

This book came into being over several years, during which time I clarified my view of the questions and issues that stood at its inception. These stemmed from two main areas. One was the study of lyrical poetry and the regular lectures I was giving on this topic to comparative literature students at the Charles University Faculty of Arts. From there stemmed questions regarding the writing of poetry outside the boundaries of a linguistic and cultural community. Exile, or so I believed, represents or may represent a context in which the fundamental and not always thematized prerequisites of a poem – especially its linguistic and cultural framework – are disrupted. I have tried to formulate these points in more detail in the opening chapter.

The second area of my interest was the poetry of Czech Exiles after 1948. It has not been thoroughly researched to this day, and no one had in any structured way posed the question how exile influenced the works of numerous Czech poets. Between 1948 and 1989, dozens of Czech writers published their poems abroad. To take just three anthologies *Neviditelný domov* [Invisible Home, 1954], *Čas stavění* [Time for Building, 1956] and *Almanach české zahraniční poezie* 1979 [Almanac of Czech Poetry Abroad], these cover the poems of some sixty authors, with many others left out, for various reasons. It has to be said that the poems are often not of exceptional value, which makes exile poetry no different from ‘home grown’ poetry, but this fact is in a sense more noticeable within the body of works produced purely in exile. In any case, a number of interesting poets appear in the broad field of Czech exile poetry, some of whom have made a substantial contribution to the overall picture of Czech poetry in their time. Regardless of how these poets might be rated, they can be examined together, from the perspective of issues raised by the specificity of exile. This aspect was well captured by Milada Součková, when in a 1956 letter she mentioned Ovid and compared him to the poets of an anthology she herself had contributed to:

‘He differs from the fifteen poets of the *Invisible Home* in that his is poetry writ large. But what he felt was identical, and there are a myriad parallels.’¹ We may with some justification doubt that Ovid actually expressed what he felt in his writing, as pointed out by a number of studies; his are rather rhetorical stratagems, which makes the alleged authenticity of his feelings highly questionable. After all, this notion also occurred to Součková herself. Yet the parallels do remain, even as regards the stratagems, albeit they need to be approached in the full recognition of historically quite distinct situations, both political and poetic.

A significant impetus, if not indeed the one that set my whole thought process in motion, was the study by Jean Starobinski, *Mémoire de Troie* [Memory of Troy]. In it he points out the significant motive force in the exile literature of European or Western culture, namely its close link to tradition. I have tried to develop Starobinski’s ideas more specifically in my second chapter, *Shaded by Reminiscence*.

Czech exile poetry provides good material to test whether the theoretical questions we started from make any sense at all, and what answers to them individual poems do provide. The concept of exile in Western culture has since the 19th and up to the 21st century covered a broad range of meanings from expulsion to travels abroad, touching on various forms of exile as driven by geopolitical conditions, so it is not realistic to write one definitive book on poetry in exile, and cover particular poems in depth, yet keep the material and conceptual apparatus sufficiently coherent. In this respect, of course, any narrowly defined area of interest also brings its own limitations. In the case of this book, the boundaries are set by the political situation of the period discussed, as well as by how far prior traditions in Czech literature impinge. Boundaries also provide an opportunity to articulate with more exactitude what lies beyond them and to describe more precisely what the given material owes to its historical constellation, and where it retains a more general reach.

Nevertheless, this book is not primarily a historical study and certainly does not try to exhaustively map Czech poetry in exile during the Cold War. There are many poets I have only touched on, given too brief a mention of, or even completely neglected, although they ought to have their place in a chapter contiguously relating to Czech poetry: they include, among others – Antonín

1 M. Součková: *Élenty*, p. 199, letter dated 20 January 1956 to Olga and Ladislav Radimský.

Brousek, Karel Brušák, Vladimíra Čerepková, Viktor Fischl, Tomáš Frýbert, Jiří Gruša, Ivan Jelínek, Jan Křesadlo, František Listopad, Milan Nápravník, Rio Preisner (also as an exile theorist), Jiří Volf, whose fate is little known, and more. My intention, which stems from the aforementioned starting points, was to describe the poetics of selected authors, and above all to try to articulate some more general conclusions about poetry in exile conditions.

The opening chapter sets out the vast scope in which exile can be talked about and tries to capture the relationship between exile and poetry. I find it important to consider, on the one hand, exile *de facto*, for which Ovid's elegies can serve as the model, and exile in the absolute sense, the idea that one is exiled by the very life one leads – in modern poetry, this pole is represented by Baudelaire's poem *Le Cygne* [The Swan]. Such polarity does not preclude the two poles being connected, or there being a range of positions between them. One significant element is also the relationship to the prior tradition of exile, which affects the given poetry in different ways. The other three chapters are devoted to comparative studies of topics cardinal to exile, at least as seen from the perspective of this book: the question of Exiles whose fate fades from memory; exile as sheltering and exile associated with the concept of Arcadia and, more generally, the idealized realm of poetry. In that section, prose could not be overlooked. The reason is obvious: exile in the Western world is intrinsically about narrative. I briefly come back to this question, and distinctions between exile poetry and storytelling, in the final chapter.

The second part of the book is devoted to Czech poetry. In the first chapter of this part I deal with the *Invisible Home* anthology, the flagship book about Czech exile in the 1950s. That is followed by three chapters focusing on the work of selected poets: Ivan Blatný, Milada Součková and Ivan Diviš. The last two chapters briefly discuss topics that are on the verges of exile in the narrower sense and point to a clear easing and a shift of emphasis at the end of the Cold War.

For foreign-language poems, and with very few exceptions, I have referenced the original and sometimes its Czech translation, and also present the original for selected prose and theoretical texts. Where no other translator is mentioned, the excerpt translations are by Václav Z J Pinkava, apart from Chapter 3, previously translated by Matthew Sweney.

At this point I would like to thank those who have helped me with advice and assistance. First and foremost, Justin Quinn, with whom I've had the opportunity to discuss the book as I went along and who encouraged me in a new direc-

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My work has been supported by funding from several institutions acknowledged in the opening part of the bibliography. I thank the The Czech Science Foundation (GAČR) for supporting my work on this book.

Some parts of the book were published before it came out as a whole, in all such cases I edited and supplemented the texts for the book publication itself.

The second chapter has been published in French:

À l'ombre du souvenir. Exil, littérature et exclusion du souvenir, *Revue de littérature comparée* 92, no. 1 (2018), pp. 3–17, transl. Benoît Meunier.

The third chapter has been published in earlier form as:

Exile and Shelter in the Work of Egon Hostovský, Vilém Flusser and Ivan Blatný, *Central Europe* (2020), DOI: 10.1080/14790963.2020.1758448, translated by Matthew Sweney.

Parts of the tenth chapter, here substantially reworked, were published as follows:

Emigracja i nomadyzm w czeskiej kulturze XX wieku. In Kiklewicz, Aleksander, Dudziak, Arkadiusz (ed.), *Nomadyzm i nomadologia: rozważania i analizy*. Olsztyn: Centrum Badań Europy Wschodniej, 2018, pp. 113–126, transl. Michael Alexa.

Jazyky v poezii exilu, *Svět literatury* 29, no. 60 (2019), pp. 55–63.

Josef Hrdlička

1. Poetry and Exile

Qui sait encore le lieu de ma naissance ?

Who only knows where I was born?

Saint-John Perse

Does it make sense to define exile poetry as other than just poems written in exile, but otherwise in principle indistinguishable from those written ‘back home’? Is there such a thing as exile poetry, or is there no reason to contemplate a category of that kind? The question is often set within the more general framework of exile literature, and a fairly recent summary notes that “*key questions like the difference between exile literature and literature written in exile remain unsolved. Conferences and compendia aimed at defining an aesthetic of exile do not, as a rule, get beyond discussing whether the question is even valid.*”¹ Indeed, is the combination of the two concepts – exile and literature, inappropriate, as Marek Pytasz suggests: ‘they come from different areas, so we can find them a common denominator in the sociology of literature, in the description of literary life and literary culture, but struggle to do so in the inherent poetics’²; or is the experience of exile so exceptional that it is also reflected in the poetics? Underlying such questions seem to be the often varied concepts of exile and home, but also the antithesis between a non-exiled and an exiled author or poet, the first of which is supposed to represent a kind of normative state, while the latter is in a situation both extraordinary and likely to affect their work. If we stay with poetry, is such an influence so significant and can it manifest itself in poems in such a way that it makes sense to talk about exile poetry? On the

1 A. Stephan: Introduction, pp. 9–10.

2 M. Pytasz: *Wygnanie, emigracja, diaspora*, p. 17.

other hand, wouldn't it be excessive to say that all poetry written in exile is 'exile poetry' in more than its external-origin sense? Or ultimately – isn't exile, with all the word's meanings, just one of the many themes that have attracted poets and readers? And is exile really some strange, symptomatic situation?

We can find arguments for, and against. In 1953, the publisher, poet and organizer of the post-February³ exodus to exile, Robert Vlach, wrote to Věra Stárková, best known for her essays in exile magazines:

Of course, you're not some 'poet of exile', and, I beg to ask, whyever should you be? Why should all poets in exile be exile-poets? Life isn't just about exile. Besides, the wind is turning, Exiles are settling down, regrets fade, and soon the exile-poet will become a pilgrimage curiosity ... Don't even think about aiming for some kind of exile poetics! Be sure to stay true to yourself! There's no need to shy away from one's public, but you cannot chase after it. If you tried to write poetry about 28 October or 7 March or some such, that would be a truly unforgivable lapse – given who you are.⁴

Robert Vlach does, of course, see the poet at one with her life, assumes that her poems express her life or are significantly connected, but at the same time he says that exile is not a situation exceptional enough to completely drive one's life, and one's poetry far less so. Another Czech poet, Karel Zlín, writes in a poem ensemble called *Listy z exilu* [Letters from Exile] dated 1977:

Zde září květy mimózy. Říkám: zde. Ale kde je to Zde?
Vždyť mluvím-li rodnou řečí na tomto místě,
jsem vlastně nepřítomen.
A tedy nepřítomen Zde i Tam,
píši svým blízkým.

3 The 1948 Czechoslovak coup d'état.

4 The letter is in safekeeping with the estate of Věra Stárková in the Literary Archive of the Museum of Czech Literature (PNP) and part of the typewritten ensemble *Setkání* [Meeting].

Here the mimosa flowers beam. I say: here. But where is this Here?
 Why, if I speak my native tongue in this place,
 I absent myself from it.
 And thus, absent Here and There,
 I write to my loved ones.⁵

In this poem, by contrast, exile appears to be a substantial formative element of the poem's speaker – the exiled person is torn away from their language, which fundamentally changes their relationship to the place, as if their very existence was diminished and split by their dislocation. Similar motifs of an existence diminished (even until death) by exile, and the duality of the situational relationship are seen in Ovid's work, referenced by the name of Zlín's poetic cycle. But that takes us onto the field of poetics. Both poets create a certain type of speaker, whom we might call the 'exiled subject', who is expressive in this odd situation, speaking elsewhere (not being at home) and from abroad (writing letters), with their self-identity split between *here* and *there*, while also enabled to speak differently. The question of speech and the speaker or subject tends to be one of the fundamental elements by which poetry is defined in the modern era.

There can be no doubt about the influence of exile on poetics and their inter-relationship, but it is certainly not a clear and simple matter, from either side. *Exile* and related phenomena and terms take on different forms and meanings at different times; and *poetry*, inasmuch as it relates to exile, is not just about portraying the harsh conditions of exile, but giving a particular notion of exile some poetic treatment. If we seek to contemplate poetry and exile, we need to consider the notions of exile that poetry portrays and poets work with, without needing to be true Exiles themselves.

I

The word exile appears in many treatises as more or less representing or summarizing a number of similar or related terms, such as banishment, emigration, displacement, exclusion, migration etc, as well as loneliness, withdrawal or

5 K. Zlín: *Poesie*, p. 105.

‘internal emigration,’ diaspora and colonization, which have different meanings, and most notably are often associated with very different social and historical contexts. Yet it is not uncommon to see a word being used in such an encompassing or paraphrasal way. To take an example, we find just such an aggregate concept of exile in Paul Tabori’s *The Anatomy of Exile*. In the introduction he defines it as follows:

The dictionaries define exile as forced separation from one’s native country, expulsion from home or the state of being expelled, banishment; sometimes voluntary separation from one’s native country. The state of banishment can also be one of devastation or alienation. Enforced removal from one’s native land, according to an edict or sentence, penal expatriation or banishment, is another version.⁶

He then lists a whole range of synonyms that characterize historically, politically and geographically distinct manifestations of exile. Sara Forsdyke gives a working definition of exile as follows:

Exile in the broadest terms can denote any separation from a community to which an individual or group formerly belonged. Exile in the strictest sense involves a physical separation from the place where one previously lived. In the modern era, however, we know of many cases of what is called ‘internal exile,’ in which an individual or group is removed from the immediate surroundings but not expelled from the country altogether.⁷

This internal exile, let us add, can also in some of its forms manifest as a voluntary withdrawal from social or political life, without involving any geographical dislocation.⁸ Most texts about exile focus on a certain historical period or a specific aspect of the issues, but we do also find attempts at a summarizing

6 P. Tabori: *The Anatomy of Exile*, p. 23.

7 S. Forsdyke: *Exile, Ostracism, and Democracy*, p. 7.

8 On the concept of internal emigration cf. E. Doblhofer: *Exil und Emigration*, pp. 221–241; R. Preisner: Na obranu německé „vnitřní emigrace“ v letech 1933–45.

approach or at least a broader perspective.⁹ The various forms of exile, migration or exclusion are undoubtedly significantly different, but when Paul Tabori was working on his book and asking various Exiles for their views, he also noted a generalizing, albeit personally involved attitude, which has its reasons:

I do not consider it a happy solution to contrast the definition of the exile with refugee, emigrant, etc. – and for purely practical reasons. Of course, you can only include people who left because of the conditions dominating their countries – but these can be transpositional. That is, political, economic, or religious corruption or backwardness affect intellectuals far sooner than others. Moholy-Nagy, Vászárhelyi (Vasarely), for instance, did not leave Hungary because of an explicit political persecution – it was the country's backwardness, the Philistinism of the ruling classes that motivated them – and it was from this situation that the religious and political persecution to which you refer, developed. In other words: I would keep the “exile” expression, but would broaden its definition so that everybody could be included of whom one must speak in such a book.¹⁰

The rather simplistic attempt to regard exile in the broadest possible terms is, not only here, clearly politically motivated: to be mentioned in a publication about exile means not only some form of recognition, it is also to take one's place in collective memory and history, in that sense also mitigating one's exclusion. In poetry, this regard for collective memory manifests itself in a similar way. Even in the earliest written documents on exile we find testimony mingling with fiction and myth, and there comes a point when the expelled, the refugees or Exiles tend to reference or liken themselves to their predecessors, as links in one chain of history, irrespective of how their standing, legal status or political situations differ. In the Middle Ages, one of the paradigmatic examples is Ovid,¹¹ who in his turn compares himself to legendary archetypes, especially to

9 The aforementioned book by Tabori; M. Tucker: *Literary Exile* seeks to sum up 20th century literary exile; J. Simpson: *The Oxford Book of Exile* presents an anthology of testimonies and documents about exile, categorized by selected exile aspects.

10 P. Tabori: *The Anatomy of Exile*, p. 35.

11 cf. R. Hexter: Ovid and the Medieval Exilic Imaginary; T. Ehlen: *Bilder des Exils*.