HUMAN EXISTENCE AS STRANGENESS
AND WRITING AS ESTRANGEMENT —
ASPECTS OF EXILE IN THE
TEXTS OF VĚRA LINHARTOVÁ

Pour qui est parti sur les chemins sinuexs d'un pèlerinage sans fin, la question de l'exil est dépouivue de sens. Car quoi qu'il en soit, il vit dans un «sans lieu» qui est un perpétuel point de départ, ouvert dans toutes les directions.

Věra Linhartová, Pour une ontologie de l'exil

In the following pages I shall attempt to address the special conception of "exile" in the work of Věra Linhartová, a conception which already appears in her early texts of the 1960s, long before her departure to France in 1968, and continues in her most recent work from the late 1980s, where various aspects of the theme are forged by the author with the same particular intensity as before.

Exile as strange otherness but at the same time as the main condition of human existence is not only a topic but also an attitude of the writer in all her texts — independently of her actual exile in Paris. "Exile" in its implication of transgression of borders, especially those of the language, forms in her work not only a positive and fundamental condition of writing but must even be seen as a creative poetics — in her mother tongue (Czech) as well as in her adopted new language (French). Exile comprises, as Věra Linhartová expresses it in an essay, a point of departure to the elsewhere, unknown, open to all possibilities.


2. Ibid, p. 129.
This poetics, subsequently emerging also on different layers of text and language, will, as we shall see, also have consequences for the "semantic activity"\(^3\) of her texts.

In an interesting study about the prose of Věra Linhartová the Czech critic and aesthetician Kvetoslav Chvatík writes in 1986 that the author's triptych *Portraits carnivores*\(^4\) (containing three stories: *La Vieille de la Montagne*, *Maître Sagiro*, *Une barbare captive*) marks the beginning of a new period in her writing, focussed especially on the experience of exile. He claims that her writing in *Portraits carnivores*:

> Je zkušenost existence ve světě, který je člověku cizí a vůči němu lhostejný, je krátké zkušeností exilu v nejobecnějším slova smyslu ... náležávým svědectvím o jedné ze základních poloh existence člověka ve výhnanství, o situaci maximální lidské izolace a neúčasti.\(^5\)

[derives from] the experience of existence in a world which is alien to man and indifferent towards him, it is, in short, *the experience of exile* in the widest sense of the word ... bearing insistent witness to one of the basic modes of existence of a person in exile, a situation of maximum human isolation and non-participation.\(^6\)

Chvatík is referring specifically to the following passage from the third text, *Une barbare captive*, spoken by the woman of the title in an inner monologue to her teacher or mentor: "C'est cela, l'exil: cette immense toile de fond de l'indifférence qui sous-tend toute mon existence bouleversée en même temps qu'inchangeée". (*Une barbare captive*, p. 59)

In a later postscript to *Portraits carnivores* Linhartová writes (1988) in response to Chvatík, observing:

> Tout récemment, un critique littéraire crut reconnaître dans les portraits carnivores un ouvrage qui relate l'expérience de l'exil. Il n'eat pas entièrement tort. Mais il convient de préciser que ce critique lui-

---

3. I adopt the terms "semantic activity" or "activity of sense", both possible translations of "dění smyslu", from Milan Jankovič, *Dílo jako dění smyslu* (Praha: Pražská imaginace, 1992), sv. 185, p. 72.


6. I am grateful to James D. Naughton for kindly providing English translations of quotations from texts published originally in Czech. All underlinings of quoted words or phrases are my own.