CHAPTER SIX

THE LITERARY ESTABLISHMENT

As already noted, the themes of ‘books’ and ‘literature’ tend to be blurred, not just in the scholarship on publishing and reading, but also in practice. Not only does the area of literature in book production tend to ‘colonise’ the book as an object of enquiry, but historically the borderlines between literary and non-literary texts have been unstable and negotiable based on conventional interpretations. There are many examples of literary and semi-literary texts that were of substantial socially and politically subversive power. Robert Darton’s work, for example, on ‘forbidden bestsellers’ showed that the definition of such genres and their capacity to bear various ‘non-literary’ messages has changed continuously over time. In the socio-cultural context of ‘normalised’ Czechoslovakia, where achieving the appearance of a steady state of affairs was among the key goals of the establishment, it was the production and dissemination of literary texts in the narrower sense (i.e. mainly fiction and poetry) that served as one of the most publicly visible signs of this stability. Both the institutional framework and personnel, established in the early 1970s, served as a secure barrier that prevented major changes in book production and reception from occurring until the first half of the 1980s. A relatively narrow circle of people occupied the positions of power in virtually all book-related institutions. Among the few indicators of possible change, still within the limits of the ‘normalised’ institutional and political setting, was the pressure exerted by a younger generation of poets (Jaroslav Čejka, Karel Sýs, Josef Peterka) on the older generation (Ivan Skála) to ease access to positions in the professional hierarchy.¹

These ‘younger’ poets built their careers in the 1970s, so they represented a generation of authors literally born on the ruins of the 1968 cultural upheaval, when, in the aftermath of the purges of authors and

texts during early 'normalisation', the local cultural scene suffered a relative shortage of personnel willing to cooperate with the re-installed hard-line communist regime. By the 1980s they had managed to occupy most of the main institutional positions in the local book world (with the exception of the positions of underpaid booksellers and literature teachers). Alongside their own creative writing they managed to accumulate enough social and political capital to be able to inhabit the editorial offices of major publishing houses (Československý spisovatel), sit on the editorial boards of periodicals (Kmen, a literary supplement of Tvorba since 1982), and get actively involved in the management of the Writers’ Union, and built opportunities for interventions at both the Party and governmental levels. The capital they were successfully accumulating was not just symbolic, as privileges could be translated into honoraria. A system was gradually established in which a publisher had to release a work by a prominent author and publish it with a high print run because of his (rarely her) special status in the political and cultural hierarchy, regardless of the potential book

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2 The academic *Dictionary of Czech Literature* refers to Karel Šýš (*1946) as one of the most visible figures who dominated official poetry and cultural politics of the 1970s and 1980s. He was an editor of the official cultural weekly Tvorba since 1974, a deputy of the editor-in-chief of its literary supplement *Kmen* since 1983, and headed *Kmen* after it became an independent periodical (1988–1989). At the same time he served as an external reviewer of poetry for a number of official publishing houses (Mladá fronta, Čs. spisovatel, Severočeské nakladatelství, Práce and Profil). His own poetry from this period “emphasised animality and sexual openness, which balanced on the very borderline of provocation”. After 1989, he assumed the position of “perhaps the last moralist and critics of the post-November development”, while through “abuses and direct threats the poet expresses his belief in the necessity to renew the rightful reign of communism”. See “Karel Šýš,” in *Slovník české literatury po roce 1945* [The Dictionary of Czech Literature since 1945], Ústav pro českou literaturu ČSAV: http://www.slovnikceskeliteratury.cz/ (accessed 25 October 2008). Jiří Žáček (*1945) was also among those who – after his first poems were published in literary journals in 1965 – fully entered the literary establishment in the early 1970s. From 1974 to 1991 he was an editor at Československý spisovatel, and headed its poetry department since 1988. He also wrote occasional reviews and essays for some of the leading officially published cultural periodicals and dailies. In his own early poetry he tried to “ostracise (poetry’s) ‘literary pose’ and noble attributes”, to develop an “intimate contact with the reader, to make lyrics more civil by turning it into a narrow set of feelings, impressions and perceptions, which ostensibly deny any metaphysics”. He intentionally honoured playfulness, improvisation and humour, features that not only made his poems very popular but also generated his continuous interest in poetry for children, which, particularly after 1989, became a focal part of his work. See “Žáček, Jiří” in Pavel Janoušek (ed.), *Slovník českých spisovatelů od roku 1945* [The Encyclopaedia of Czech Fiction Writers Since 1945], (Prague: Brána & Ústav pro českou literaturu Akademie věd ČR, 2 volumes: 1995–1998), Vol. 2, 715–718.