

The Marvel of Biographical Bookkeeping

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Translated from the German by Katy Derbyshire

*For Ivan Blatný and Nicholas Moore,
who took new liberties after being robbed of their own.*

When the critic George Steiner looked through the entries for the *Sunday Times* Baudelaire translation competition he was judging in 1968, he was no doubt a little surprised. Someone had submitted more than thirty versions of the same poem.

That someone was Nicholas Moore, an aspiring English poet during the 1940s, who had somehow disappeared from the radar at the end of that decade and had not made a reappearance since.

That is, Nicholas Moore had never really disappeared; instead he had slipped unnoticed into the workings of time and, in addition, had suffered a series of blows of fate, all of which he had somehow survived. Yet in the world of letters, Nicholas Moore was a dead man, catapulted out of a literary machinery revolving ever faster, and often merely around itself.

1948 was his fateful year. And it went like this:

Nicholas Moore, a twenty-nine-year-old author of numerous poetry collections, editor of diverse magazines and anthologies and the recipient of respected literary prizes – Nicholas Moore, a frequent and welcome guest in the paper worlds of

When the journalist Jürgen Serke came across a slim man with a small cut on his freshly shaven cheek in St. Clements Hospital in Ipswich in 1981, he was no doubt a little surprised. The man had been declared dead more than thirty years previously.

That man was Ivan Blatný, an aspiring Czech poet during the 1940s, who had absconded from his delegation on a trip to London in 1948, stayed in London and then disappeared.

That is, Ivan Blatný had never really disappeared; instead he was struggling with paranoia as a result of his escape and exile, which took him behind the secure walls of various English hospitals. Yet in the world of letters, Ivan Blatný was a dead man, his name erased by a literary machinery surviving on suppression and silencing.

1948 was his fateful year. And it went like this:

Ivan Blatný, a twenty-eight-year-old author of numerous poetry collections, prose works and children's books, recently adopted into the official canon of Czech literary history – Ivan Blatný, an author awarded a grant and dispatched to London by the national writers' syndicate –

Anglo-American poetry, leading an almost secure life in comparison to other poets – Nicholas Moore, who dedicated a large part of his poetry to his wife Priscilla and even named a book after her – Nicholas Moore is abandoned: by his wife, by financial independence, and by the good fortune of being printed and read.

The only person, it seems, to take an interest in Nicholas Moore thenceforth is the man who steals his wallet in the crush at London's Petticoat Lane market: containing not so much money as letters of inestimable value – letters that Moore had exchanged over the years with the American poet Wallace Stevens and the British writer Osbert Sitwell.

All that remains is lonely, wasted land. Everywhere around him. Not only has Priscilla left, but she has also taken their daughter with her, and Moore has to give up the flat where the three of them previously lived. He finds a new place to live (where he stays for the rest of his life): a small ground-floor flat in a desolate part of southeast London.

Ivan Blatný, who was a member of the influential artists' group Skupina 42 and schooled his poetic manifesto within the collective – Ivan Blatný abandons everything: his home, his friends, his position in Czech literary history.

The only person, it seems, to take an interest in Ivan Blatný thenceforth is an agent from the Czechoslovakian secret service, whom someone has charged with tempting the poet back for propaganda purposes. A hopeless undertaking. Blatný, the spy reports, has come to terms with his new life in hospital and lost all contact to the outside world.

All that remains is dead, unfamiliar land. Everywhere around him. Not only has Blatný gone into exile, but he has also found no new home here and soon, mentally defeated, has to surrender his new-found freedom again. He finds a new place to live (where he stays for the rest of his life): a series of psychiatric hospitals, the first of which – Claybury – is in the northeast of London.