

## THE NATURE POET

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A postwar Austrian poet—whose name you might not recognize but who was in his time a fairly prominent figure on the Viennese scene, a fixture of the literary circle at Café Raimund—struggled most of his career to free his poetry from the shadow of his father, a Nazi officer. No one suspected the son of any Nazi sympathies; he even married a Jewish woman. The problem, rather, was that all of his poetry was interpreted by critics as a meditation on his father’s crimes. In truth, he had no interest in his father, really no interest in the past at all. He cared about nature: mountains, creeks, ferns. He called himself, at various points, a *creekpoet* or *fernpoet*. Yet every creek, every fern, was construed by his critics—from his very first major review in *Die Zeit* in 1968—as a “reckoning” with the actions of his father, who had once shot 150 Hungarian Jews in one day with his own pistol. The critic noted the total absence in the poet’s poems of people, history, politics, fathers, et cetera, and saw their absence as a sign that they were actually the poet’s primary concerns, the

unspeakable void at the center of his ferns. (The review was *extremely* positive.)

Of course the poet deplored his father's actions. But his "primary concerns" were mountains, creeks, and, especially, ferns.

Over the next decade he published two more acclaimed volumes of nature poetry. Both were interpreted as oblique meditations on his father's crimes.

His fourth volume of nature poetry came out in 1985. It, too, was interpreted as an oblique meditation on his father's crimes, but the reviews were less rapturous than before. The critic for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wondered if the poet had anything *else* to write about, anything *besides* his father's wartime crimes, now more than forty years old. "The highly circumscribed nature of his interests," wrote the critic, "became apparent with his second volume and glaring with his third. Now, with his *fourth* consecutive collection of poems to ponder how one generation's crimes burden the next, it has finally become a liability."

For the next thirty years the poet published nothing at all.

His friends began to suspect he was dead, presumably by his own hand. Everyone else forgot about him altogether.

But we now know that he never stopped writing. In fact, he had embarked upon his most ambitious project.

Since every description of a fern had been interpreted as an oblique meditation on his father's crimes, he would write an epic poem about his father's brutal crimes that was actually, obliquely, a description of a single fern. He knew the fern he wanted to describe. It grew on the fringes of a clearing in the woods near his home. A lovely fern. To describe it was easy. By now, that was

nothing. But to describe it without mentioning the woods, the clearing, or the fern, to use only words that told how his father executed 150 Hungarian Jews, and yet to implant in his reader's mind, by the time he finished reading the poem, an accurate and even quite detailed image of this one particular fern near his home: *that* was hard. He wanted his reader to close the book, this exhausting, appalling, tragic, merciless book, and have nothing in his head—no ideas, no horrors, no faces, no place names, no characters, no concepts, no morals—nothing but the precise image of a specific fern. He wanted the reader to think to himself: “I just read about the Holocaust. Why am I picturing this fern? What is the *matter* with me?” Such was the literary effect he was aiming for.

When he told his wife his idea, she left him.

The composition of the poem occupied the last thirty years of the poet's life. In the first decade he contemplated his dead father, reading his journals and researching his savage Hungarian campaign, with special attention to the atrocities of June 1, 1941. The subsequent decade was devoted to careful contemplation of the fern: sketching the plant, scribbling notes, often simply sitting there staring at it. In the final decade of his life, the nature poet tried to describe the fern through a narrative poem about his father's June 1st depravity.

This year he finally published *The Kistelek Massacre*. He died the night before its publication, uncertain whether he had succeeded in his aim. He would have treasured this morning's brief review in *Die Zeit*, which simply calls *The Kistelek Massacre* “an elegant evocation of a fern.”

## ABOVE AND BEYOND

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The University of Chicago, where his father had been first a professor and then president, wrote to ask him whether he would consider posing for a sculptor who would be erecting a statue of his father in the classics quadrangle. They sent a sketch of the proposed statue: his father striding forward with his left leg, his right hand gripping a volume of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The son wrote back that he would not only consider posing for the artist, he would consider standing, himself, in the classics quadrangle in just that position—left leg striding forward, right hand gripping Ovid—for the rest of his life, and would actually even consider rotating continually but imperceptibly so that he was always facing the sun. To this offer, which the son noted went “above and beyond” what they had requested, the University of Chicago did not respond.

## THE CHIMNEY SWEEP

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When, in 1919, Henry Hobson Fowler, the only son of a London chimney sweep, was named Wykeham Professor of Logic at Oxford University, his colleagues marveled openly at his improbable escape from the chimneys of his fathers into the rarefied air of logic and language. And for a time in his early career it really *did* seem that Fowler had torn himself root and branch out of his own past, from that long line of chimney sweeps into which he had been born, even extirpating all traces of his working-class accent.

But either he was still held in the grip of a tenacious ancestral worldview, or the condescending awe of his colleagues awakened in him certain latent ancestral loyalties, or perhaps he simply came to see some symbolic value in his ancestral vocation, for he began around 1922 or 1923 to speak of his approach to philosophy as “a kind of logico-linguistic chimney sweeping,” and over time construed this metaphor in an increasingly literal fashion.

For a while it remained purely figurative. “Our task,” he told

students on the first day of his fall 1923 seminar, according to notes taken by one of them, “is to shimmy up the flue of logic and language and clear it out.” In fall 1924, he specified: “We clear out the philosophical flue with, in one hand, our *brush* and, in the other hand, our *scraper*.” Fall 1925: “With our brush we sweep away the loose soot, and with our scraper we chip away at the solid soot.” According to the seminar notes, a student asked whether Fowler was referring to “a real chimney or a logico-linguistic chimney,” and Fowler replied: “A logico-linguistic chimney. The philosophical flue.” In a lecture that spring term, Fowler warned: “It is extremely easy to get trapped in the flue and to suffocate from the soot. As you’re climbing, you must never jam your knees against your chest, in this position.” He showed them. “You’ll suffocate, and we may very well have to dismantle the chimney to retrieve your body.” Again a student asked, according to the lecture notes, whether he was referring to “an actual chimney or some kind of philosophical chimney,” and Fowler replied: “A philosophical chimney.”

Starting in the fall term of 1928, Fowler distributed to his seminar students a brush and a scraper and asked them to raise, whenever they were arguing a philosophical point, either the brush, if they were dislodging *loose* logico-linguistic soot, or the scraper, if they were chipping away at *solid* logico-linguistic soot. He himself brought to seminar every week a long, adjustable, articulated rod with a brush head affixed to one end. With your brushes and scrapers and this long, flexible rod, Fowler exhorted them, we shall clear out the philosophical flue.

“Having done so,” said Fowler, in one student’s notes, “we

mustn't expect the flue to remain clear ever after. Soon, *with use*, it will fill up with ash and soot once again and we shall have to climb up it once more with our brushes and scrapers, our adjustable rods. Such is the nature of chimneys." He fielded from a student the usual question—*are you talking about regular chimneys or logico-linguistic chimneys?*—but replied this time that he did not understand the distinction the student was trying to draw.

"A chimney," said Fowler, "is a chimney. We clear out the soot." He gestured up and down with the long rod. "We clear out the soot."

In late autumn of 1930, a number of Fowler's students complained to the head of the department that most of their seminars were now spent clearing out chimneys around Oxford, work which was dirty, dangerous, and not conspicuously philosophical in nature. Yesterday he had sent them up a very treacherous chimney whose flue had both vertical and horizontal sections and multiple right angles. Two students had almost suffocated to death. The only sign that a logic seminar had been taking place was that Fowler had occasionally referred to the flue as "the philosophical flue."

He became, after this, quite a controversial figure. Half the university persisted in thinking him a genius, a refugee from poverty who had not only escaped his past but now wielded it as a metaphor to demolish our old beliefs about logic and language. They looked on with wonder as he crossed the quadrangle covered in soot, carrying his long adjustable rod with the brush head affixed to one end. The other half thought his escape attempt had, belatedly, failed. He was, in the end, still a chimney

sweep. He was not so much wielding his past as being wielded by it, less seizing upon a metaphor than being seized upon by it, they said, and he would, in due course, cause a number of students to die of suffocation.

From our modern vantage point we understand both perspectives on Fowler. Both were right. He *did* sweep out some nineteenth-century nonsense from our understanding of logic and language, and he *did* cause the death by suffocation of numerous undergraduate and graduate students. Both were right; but these days, if Fowler is remembered at all, it's as a chimney sweep, the last of a breed, not as the first of a new kind of logician. His own body was found wedged in his own particularly narrow flue in the winter of 1953. A bricklayer had to be summoned to gain access to the corpse.

## THE WORKER'S FIST

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In 1902 the rubber-goods mogul Moses Frenkel gave his son a large sum of money to produce the company catalog. Unbeknownst to his father, Isaac Frenkel was a nascent anarchist whose feelings toward his father—an arch-capitalist who was nevertheless a humane, compassionate man, beloved by his factory workers—were ambivalent in the extreme. Isaac embezzled the money and produced an anarchist broadsheet called *The Worker's Fist*. Isaac's ambivalent feelings, however, must have bled over into the text, for his father studied *The Worker's Fist* carefully and then congratulated him on an “outstanding rubber-goods catalog” with a “pungent, poetic title. Bravo, bravo.”

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## DIVING RECORD

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A Florida man died Monday while trying to surpass his father's record for deep diving without the aid of oxygen or fins. Thirty years ago, in the Gulf of Mexico, the father famously dove 225 feet without using oxygen or fins. On Monday the son made three dives in the same location, all without using oxygen or fins. His first dive was 167 feet. His second dive was 191 feet. On his third attempt the son managed to dive down 216 feet without oxygen or fins, but his lungs burst on the way up and he died aboard his diving vessel. At the funeral, his father tearfully admitted that in his record-setting dive he had actually used both oxygen *and* fins.

## PROGRESS

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One of those odd accidents that so often propel scientific and technological progress. A Bavarian physicist in the first decade of the twentieth century built a brilliant apparatus intended to produce evidence to support his father's controversial theory of matter. When the evidence produced by his apparatus showed, however, that his father's theory was, on the contrary, wrong—in fact, ridiculous—he faced a choice: either demolish the apparatus, thereby obliterating all evidence of his own scientific genius, or humiliate his father.

He wandered gloomily in the mountains surrounding his lab. First he resolved to destroy the thing, to preserve his father's name by snuffing out his own. Then he resolved to do just the opposite, to thrust his apparatus into the spotlight, publish his results, make his own name by snuffing out his father's. He went back and forth between destroying his apparatus and preserving his father, and preserving his apparatus and destroying his father. He sat and stared at the apparatus with an axe in his lap,

growing increasingly tormented as he pondered these equally horrifying alternatives. Then, just as his torment reached a point of unparalleled intensity and he lifted the axe high above his head, intending either to bring it down upon the apparatus (thereby preserving his father) or to fling it away from him (thereby destroying his father), he realized, all of a sudden and completely unexpectedly, that the so-called supercooled detector plate, which was actually a relatively minor component of the apparatus, could also, presumably, be used, with the proper adjustments, to *rapidly freeze meats*.

Thus modern-day meat preservation was born.

Happy ending for the world—not so much for the father and son, who later fell out over the son’s frozen-beef export empire. The father could not understand how such a promising young physicist could abandon science for such a sordid and unscrupulous industry. He never found out that he had his son’s flash-frozen patties to thank for the endurance of his ridiculous theory of matter, which reigned supreme until his death and was superseded only with the development of quantum mechanics in the 1920s. The son’s technique, of course considerably modernized, remains to this day the most effective way to freeze beef quickly.