

William Plomer (1903-73)

2 *Atheling Grange: or, the Apotheosis of Lotte Nussbaum*

[From a Sussex newspaper, October, 1953: 'HOUSEKEEPER MISSING—Miss Lotte Nussbaum (48), who came to this country as a refugee from Nazi Germany before the war, is reported missing from Soundrift, Hydrangea-avenue, Atheling-on-Sea, where she has for some years resided as housekeeper to Mrs Elvaston-Clurch.

'As Miss Nussbaum's shopping-basket is also missing, it is thought that she may have gone out to gather blackberries have failed to find any trace of the missing woman.']

1

A heavy mist. A muffled sea.  
A cloth of cobwebs veils the grass.  
Upstairs alone the refugee  
Sees autumn in her glass:

A touch of autumn in the air, 5  
The knife of autumn in the heart  
Of one too constantly aware  
Of living half apart.

Is comfort peace? Can it restore 10  
The severed root within the mind?  
Domestic service evermore  
Is not what hope designed:

Kindly and rich and not a fool  
The widow whom she housekeeps for,  
But unadventurous, so cool, 15  
So English, such a bore.

Today the harmless Mrs Clunch  
Went up to London on her own,  
And Lotte, dreamy after lunch,  
Feels even more alone: 20

She has no one to whom to turn  
And reminisce of those lost lives  
The autumn smell of leaf and fern  
So poignantly revives;

It quickens an old appetite, 25  
This dank and thrilling smell;  
She feels a craving now to bite  
Mushroom or Chanterelle;

Off with a basket she will go  
To find if, where the fields begin, 30  
Some palatable fungi grow,  
And if so, bring them in;

She knows the very ones to look for—  
Fresh, firm, not too mature—  
There'll only be herself to cook for, 35  
A secret epicure!

2

Lotte acquired upon her native hills  
The caution of a fungivore,  
Knew how to look a *Giftpilz* in the gills  
And where for *Steinpilz* one had best explore, 40  
So now with confidence she reconnoitres,  
Steps forward, backward, stoops, intently loiters.

Though no mycophagist could be more eager,  
She finds she isn't doing well,  
After an hour her harvesting is meagre— 45  
Two Puffballs, and a not too fresh Morel;  
But strolling on beyond her usual range  
She comes to the deserted Atheling Grange.

3

Where formerly curlews were calling

And orchises fell with the hay 50  
The last of the meadows are falling  
To bungalows gnawing their way;

The seaboard is doubly eroded-  
To seaward by gale-driven water,  
And inland, where fields are outmoded 55  
By inroads of bricks and of mortar;

But still, though its owners have died out,  
An island of ilex encloses  
A nineteenth-century hide-out  
Once lovely with lawns and with roses; 60

The owls, who succeeded its owners,  
Would quit it with screeches tonight  
If they knew that the place is now known as  
A 'ripe-for-development' site.

The state of the place is appalling- 65  
What is wrongly described as a shambles;  
Everywhere ivy is crawling  
And striving to strangle the brambles;

Everywhere brambles are clinging  
And creepers are climbing and creeping, 70  
The nettles are ready for stinging,  
The willows have reason for weeping;

The woods were cut down in the 'twenties,  
The farm was sold off at a loss,  
The lodge is kept only by woodlice, 75  
The gateposts are padded with moss;

Bindweed has smothered the greenhouse,  
The summer-house under the yew  
Is now just a cannot-be-seen house  
That commands an invisible view. 80

O house once delightfully lived in,  
O Atheling Grange, did they build you

For dry rot and wet rot to feed on,  
A medium for mould and for mildew?

Why ask such an imbecile question? 85  
That rhetorical style has gone by,  
And nothing would be more surprising  
Than to hear the old ruin reply.

With bunches of bats on the ceilings  
And droppings of rats in the hall, 90  
The decline of the Grange is complete and  
At any time now it may fall.

4

Though Lotte is aware how torn her coat is,  
Full steam ahead she ploughs and pushes  
Tank-like through snags and tangled thorny bushes, 95  
Quite undeterred by wire or warning notice,  
Convinced this *Hintergarten* she has found  
Will prove to be her happy hunting-ground.

How right she is- but God knows how she knew it!  
She's in a mycophil's Utopia 100  
Where autumn, from a golden cornucopia,  
Has tipped out every sort of Cèpe and Blewit.  
She fills her basket quickly. New to her  
Truffles one doesn't have to disinter;

Not new to her, but never yet so keen, 105  
So *appetitlich* and so rich  
That mushroom smell; nor has she ever seen  
The Beefsteak Fungus growing in a ditch;  
Here on a stump some tender Buff Caps quiver,  
There *Pluteus* swells, like Strasburg goose's liver; 110

And peering downward through a rusty grating  
Into what used to be the cellars  
She sees there, prettily proliferating,  
A multitude of little beige umbrellas,

Throngs of a choice and edible Boletus 115  
That seem to say 'Come down, my dear, and eat us!'

'*Embarras de richesse!*' she might exclaim,  
If she could coin so French a phrase—  
So many kinds she doesn't know by name,  
All ready to be cooked in different ways: 120  
But who to feed? She yearns to summon up  
Her long-lost kin to sit with her and sup.

'*Himmel!*' she sighs ... And at that very word  
Celestial choirs inflate the breeze,  
*Die ganze Vogelschar* gets busy in the trees, 125  
And then a band— a German band— is heard  
Playing a waltz by Waldteufel or Strauss,  
And all the lights light up inside the house.

'*Himmel!*' she cries. And so it is— she's right!  
Across the new-mown lawn advance 130  
Her long-lost family, arrayed in white,  
Her parents leading in a lively dance  
Her brothers, sisters, nieces, uncles, aunts,  
With crowns and harps— a most unearthly sight!

Oh, what a welcome for Miss Nussbaum! See, 135  
All's *himmelhoch* and *himmelblau!*  
Heaven is hers, and she is Heaven's now!  
She's disembodied, disencumbered, free!  
Lotte is free! . . . Tomorrow Mrs Clunch  
Will have no drudge to cook her blasted lunch. 140

1954

(From *Collected Poems*. London, 1960)