

Second Look: Revisiting a poem by W.S. Merwin

(excerpt from essay by Matthew Zapruder published at Poets.org.)

The Furrow

*Did I think it would abide as it was forever
all that time ago the turned earth in the old garden
where I stood in spring remembering spring in another
place
that had ceased to exist and the dug roots kept
giving up
their black tokens their coins and bone buttons and shoe
nails
made by hands and bits of plates as the thin clouds
of that season slipped past gray branches on which the
early
white petals were catching their light and I thought
I knew
something of age then my own age which had conveyed
me
to there and the ages of the trees and the walls and
houses
from before my coming and the age of the new seeds as I
set each one in the ground to begin to remember
what to become and the order in which to return
and even the other age into which I was passing
all the time while I was thinking of something different*

The *it* of the first line of the poem refers, most obviously, to the nearest antecedent, the furrow. The speaker is asking himself if, when he first dug the furrow and planted the seeds, he thought that it, this strip of dug-up earth, would always “abide as it was forever,” continue for all time to be there the way it was. Of course, part of him did not, because he was planting seeds, which he presumably thought (or at least hoped) would grow. But part of him probably did assume or think (even though his conscious mind would have been aware in a logical sense that this was not the case) that the earth would always stay this way: dug up, disrupted, in a state of change.

In addition to the basic meaning of the first line and beyond this particular situation of gardening, this question obviously has a larger, more allegorical context. *It* seems not merely to be the furrow but also an unspecified feeling, maybe a state of being or a time in life. It’s hard to say at the beginning of the poem. The peculiar combination of specificity (the furrow) and multiple possibility (the unspoken huge feeling or idea to which the word *it* also points) is

what gives the poem its immediate air of significance. A furrow is, literally, an agricultural term. But it is also, more familiarly for most people, what a forehead does when one is confused or troubled. A reader can easily imagine the narrator, who in the third line is thinking about a previous stage in his life, with a furrowed brow, trying (like the reader!) to think through something important, right there in front of him but also a bit elusive.

This poem is characteristic of many in *The Vixen*. It begins with a clear, direct, narrative situation. Someone is standing and looking at “the old garden” and thinking about how he planted seeds there. But the more I read the poem, the more I realize how complex it is, especially in its relationship to time. There are, actually, at least four different time periods in the poem. There is the current time, when the speaker is looking at the garden. There is the earlier spring, when the narrator made the furrow and planted the seeds. And there is the spring earlier than that one, the one that the narrator is remembering he remembered as he planted: “I stood in spring remembering spring in another place / that had ceased to exist.” And then there is the much older time when these objects—“their black tokens their coins and bone buttons and shoe nails / made by hands and bits of plates”—first found their way into the earth the narrator is digging up.

So underneath this seemingly simple poem is actually a complex layering of time and memory. Now, in the current time, looking at the garden, the narrator remembers how he thought at the time when he was planting that he knew something important about life: “I thought I knew / something of age then my own age which had conveyed me / to there and the ages of the trees and the walls and houses / from before my coming and the age of the new seeds as I / set each one in the ground.”

Maybe he did know something important then. But he knows something even more important now. At that time, even though all he could see was change and disruption and the hope and efforts to start something new, a new stage in his own life was already coming to be. The poem ends with a statement that is not only particular to this narrator’s life and experience but also feels aphoristic: we are always passing into new stages, while all the time we are thinking of something different. In isolation, this seems banal, but when this statement is reached at the end of the poem, it has the force of quiet revelation.

Paradoxically, wonderfully, when such statements seemingly come out of nowhere—reached by associative methods and not by accretive logic—they feel all the more convincing. And this, I think, is one of the things readers truly love about poetry, this ability to hear wisdom that feels truly wise yet also disembodied, as though it comes from the world itself.