**July Man**

Old, rain-wrinkled, time-soiled, city-wise, morning man

whose weeping is for the dust of the elm-flowers

and the hurting motes of time,

rotted with rotting grape,

sweet with the fumes,

puzzled for good by fermented potato peel out of the vat of the times,

turned out and left

in this grass-patch, this city-gardener’s place

under the buzzing populace’s

square shadows, and the green shadows

of elm and ginkgo and lime

(planted for Sunday strollers and summer evening

families, and for those

bird-cranks with bread-crumbs

and crumpled umbrellas who come

while the dew is wet on the park, and beauty

is fan-tailed, grey and dove grey, aslant, folding in

from the white fury of day).

In the sound of the fountain

you rest, at the cinder-rim, on your bench.

The rushing river of cars

makes you a stillness, a pivot, a heart-stopping

blurt, in the sorrow

of the last rubbydub swig, the searing, and

stone-jar solitude lost, and yet,

and still – wonder (for good now) and

trembling:

The too much none of us knows

is weight, sudden sunlight, falling

on your hands and arms, in your lap,

all, all, in time.

Margaret Avison, The Dumbfounding (1966),

taken from Always Now (2003)

The poem July Man seems to be a slightly muddled expression of sadness at first reading. Clearly the focus of the poem, identified in the simple couplet from l19:

**“**In the sound of the fountain

you rest, at the cinder-rim, on your bench”

is an elderly man taking his ease in a city park or piece of open ground. He sits on the cinder rim of a fountain suggesting both old age and the endless rushing of time in the metaphor of the fountain which is heard behind him. Possibly the fact that it is not seen suggests that the old man is as unaware as the narrator of time passing him by. The free verse used in the poem helps to suggest this sense of a lack of control or awareness of events since the lack of any clearly identifiable pattern to the poem is suggestive of similarly pattern-free lives.

The July man is placed at the opening of the poem in a description which blends compound adjectives and homophonic devices to establish both his character and his purpose within the poem. “July man” is itself a juxtaposition of ideas which becomes clear at once. Far from a happy, warm response to the title, the initial “old” places the man at the centre of a list of negatives. He is “rain-wrinkled” and “time-soiled”, two compounds which concisely locate him as aged and probably homeless – he is a figure of the aged wanderer who permeates literature in the form of the Wandering Jew amongst other ideas – and he is also in mourning as far as the ear responds to the homophonic “morning man” who “weeps for the dust of the elm trees” in an image which recalls the Christian funeral service as well as providing further clear description of the focal figure. In the final stanza, the man is illuminated by the sun and becomes representative of the weight of the human condition, but before this, the narrator watches and notices the mundane. He is a drinker of cheaply made vegetable alcohol. He is as much of an outcast as the “potato peelings” he distils and is, like them “left” in this “grass patch” – hardly the description of a prosperous park. The placing of “left” at the end of a line with a lack of end-stopping provides a sense of the continuous vision of the narrator – the whole opening stanza is one long stream of consciousness sentence- and also is syntactically unclear as to its application –the man or the potatoes?

It is worth noting that the setting itself is as negative as the July Man. The language around the park is strangely unsettled – the populace is “buzzing” and their homes reduced to “square shadows”, all of which creates a sense of the park as some form of barren oasis, surrounded by the “rushing river” of traffic. The man and the park are unified here as a stillness and the curious phrase “a heart-stopping/Blurt…” where the additional surprise of the nonsense word created by the enjambement adds to the sense of shock and stillness created for the narrator by this sight. The language takes on overtones of pain (“searing” and “solitude”) before the hesitation of the closing of stanza 3 where the repetition of “and” suggests ideas coming to mind which are linked to the idea of some form of revelation by the word “wonder”. The phrase “for good now” is also ambiguous suggesting both eternity and the absence of negative thoughts.

This serves to prepare the reader for the final stanza in which, almost as some form of living memento mori, the July Man is seen as somehow symbolic of the “too much none of us knows”. Old age and wisdom are often linked and here the wisdom of the much suffering old man is the catalyst for the narrator’s awareness of just how little humans do know. The scene is lit by sunlight – as though a message from God – which seems to confer some sort of blessing on the July Man despite his suffering.

That he should be singled out for this is less of a surprise when the section of stanza 1 in parentheses is considered. Here the characters for whom the park was built are listed. There is stress on the leisured “Sunday strollers and Summer evening families” and those who are not alone. The alliterative pattern of sibilants and more powerful labial and guttural sounds (“bird-cranks”, crushed umbrellas”) suggests a negative view of these interlopers into the July Man’s world. The parentheses themselves could even be suggestive of the man’s thought processes, though a record of the thoughts of the narrator/poet is more likely.

A close reading has served to clarify much of the apparent muddle of the first glance. This poem is a study of the human condition and the awareness of the transient nature of humanity. At the centre of tempestuous lives there is a stillness, a “pivot” often unrecognised by those who are the everyday people mentioned in the first stanza. The message is not one of unremitting gloom, however, and a blessing of sorts is conferred both on the July Man and the narrator who has recognised his significance.