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Danish Nobel Laureates in Literature
With Special Emphasis on Johannes V. Jensen

by Erik M. Christensen

Religion, Philosophy, and Art are related. Sometimes more than other. They are so much in family, in fact, that they are able to become one. This may even happen without being intended or even realized, but we also have, in Western civilization, instances where the artist very clearly meant his work to represent a unity of Religion, Philosophy, and Art. The greatest known instance of this is, of course, Dante Alighieri’s poem La Divina Commedia (ca. 1307-1320), the story of his wandering through Purgatory, down to Hell, and up to Paradise where his ideal love for Beatrice allows him to unite with God. If you are the reader Dante intended you to be, you will at the end of The Divine Comedy be convinced that Religion, Philosophy, and Art are very much in family and certainly able to become one.

We are talking in this paper about the three Danish poets who received the Nobel Prize in literature, the most prestigious crowning of a poet in our world. They are Karl Gjellerup, Henrik Pontoppidan, and Johannes V. Jensen. All three lived and accomplished some of their major work around the year 1900. Karl and Henrik shared the prize in 1917; Johannes received it by himself in 1944. On the Internet, you will get many hits if you ask Google about Johannes V. Jensen. Or, if you find time, you should try the Nobel Prize homepage at www.nobelprize.org where you will find photos of the three men along with the original presentation by the Nobel Committee giving the published grounds for the awarding of the prize. Also you will find their autobiographies and other texts. But take this warning seriously: there is a lot of baloney, misinformation, and bad faith in circulation; if you get seriously interested in any subject, you will want to know the truth about it—and that is not always easy.

If you want to know what a poet has written, you will have to read him yourself. And if you want to understand what your poet has
written, you may sometimes have to stick to the job for a lifetime. In many cases, in the end you will have to decide for yourself what the meaning could be, almost as in religion and philosophy.

In the following sections, you will find a four-liner by each of our three great poets, the Nobel Laureates of the years 1917 and 1944, respectively. Let us try to understand those three poems. They have all been written, and/or published, and/or used by their authors as complete texts—finished, self-contained, and to be read as they appear here. The translations are perhaps helpful, not poetry.¹

**Karl Gjellerup**

Let us begin with Karl Gjellerup. He is not a poet that I think much of. It has been quite an experience trying to get to know him on my way to talking about him here. Gjellerup lived in Denmark from 1857 to 1892, thirty-five stormy years. From 1892 until his death in 1919, he lived with his German wife in Dresden, a great city of art in Germany. He published many books in both countries and in both languages. None of his works are in print today, and only professionals read him. His books remain practically untouched in libraries and with antiquarians. Booksellers in Denmark and Germany do not even know his name.

As a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature, however, he was recommended and repeatedly supported by important people, the most important perhaps being professor Vilhelm Andersen of Copenhagen University. It was Andersen who, in the end, suggested to the Nobel Prize Committee that the prize might well be shared by Gjellerup (the idealist) and Pontoppidan (the realist). They shared it then, but Andersen lived long enough to think that Gjellerup was a bad choice. Many people thought so and said so when he was nominated in 1917, and better choices were named—for instance, the critic Georg Brandes and the novelist Martin Andersen Nexø, both men of world renown. Gjellerup got the prize because influential people thought that his literary work fitted well with Alfred Nobel’s will calling for poetry of "an idealistic tendency." The idealism in Gjellerup’s prosaic, dramatic, and lyrical texts is a late echo of great German poetry, religion, and philosophy. Since the German classical and romantic tradition still had its
supporters in Denmark as well as in Sweden, and also celebrated an apparently great afterlife in the Germany of Richard Wagner, the road was paved for Gjellerup. But he never wrote great literature, and almost anybody trying to read him now will know. His best work may be the four-liner that is presented here. There is, of course, much more to say about Gjellerup and about his very interesting position between the ages, but let us take a look at the idealistic poem of his, "Et Par" ["A Couple"].

Et Par
Tag den hele Verden fra os –
Giv os evig Nat til Ly –
Jeg er Eros, du er Chaos,
Verden hæver sig paany.

A Couple
Take the whole world from us –
Give us eternal night for shelter –
I am Eros, you are Chaos,
The world arises anew.2

"Et Par" is rhymed a-b-a-b and the rhythm is obvious and regular. What the poem says is this: The world and we shall be reborn forever, eternally, as long as we, Eros and Chaos, meet. This may be strange stuff to our modem ears. However, in ways of thinking that were current in his time and explicitly supported by Gjellerup in other contexts, the message is explainable as an eclectic mixture of Greek and Indian, Platonic and Buddhist thought. "Et Par" is a religious and philosophical mix of known ideas in the shape of a memorable rhyme. Eros is then the essential male principle of highly organized, creative longing for union with the female, and Chaos is the essential female nature of unordered matter. If you delve any further into this, you will encounter the writings of Otto Weininger, first published in Germany in 1903 and immediately translated into Danish by Karl Gjellerup in 1905. You will meet Christianity—not least in the well-known shape of fear of the female—and you will have a hard time with loathsome, quite idealistic fantasies.

Henrik Pontoppidan
Henrik Pontoppidan knew very well what he thought of Gjellerup and obviously was not amused at sharing anything with that man in Dresden. But he graciously did not say so, and I am glad to say that Henrik Pontoppidan is a great writer. His works are in print, and
he is read and discussed. All libraries complain these days that new media are taking attention away from good books. I believe they are right. I see it in my own family. Having three boys of thirteen, eleven, and eight years of age means that we talk a lot of PlayStations and personal computers, and not too much of books. Henrik Pontoppidan is not being read and discussed in a way that threatens the new media.

Like Karl Gjellerup, Henrik Pontoppidan was the son of a minister. Unlike Gjellerup, however, Pontoppidan decided not to study theology; he chose engineering, but broke off his studies shortly before graduating. He had decided to become a full-time writer. And he did. His three great novels in several volumes each are, as he says in his autobiography for the Nobel Foundation, a trilogy in which he has attempted to give a continuous picture of Denmark of his time through descriptions of human minds and human fates that reflect the social, religious, and political struggles of the time. Lykke-Per [Lucky Per] is the centerpiece, unforgettable. Having read that trilogy you will be asking yourself the fundamental existential questions—and no end.

Pontoppidan, like Gjellerup and Johannes V. Jensen, took up his vocation under the influence of Henrik Ibsen’s critical realism, Darwin’s evolutionary theories, the march of liberalism, democracy, industrial capitalism and socialism, Kierkegaard’s critique of the Church in Denmark, German historical criticism of the Bible and Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity. But perhaps the most urgent question in the minds of all three men—as in many, many others after the Prussian-Austrian victory over Denmark in 1864—remained the national Angst, the fear that Denmark could not survive. This is reflected in Gjellerup’s departure for Dresden and his choice of German idealism, and it is reflected in Pontoppidan’s preoccupation with the deepest question in his trilogy: Who are we, and who am I from here to eternity? Perhaps you see it in his verse without much comment.

Vi ejer Skatte nok af Sølv og Guld,
men lever oftest dog paa Laan og Leje.
Kun hvad vi pløjer op af egen Muld,  
beholder vi til evig Arv og Eje.

We own treasures enough of silver and gold,  
but yet live most often from loan and lease. –  
Only what we plough up from our own soil,  
we keep as eternal heritage and possession.

The dash after the second line indicates that the general truth of the first part of the four-liner has a parallel in the second half of the poem, where the rhyme (Guld/Muld = gold/mould, transl. gold/soil) lets you remember the two great golden horns of old, found in Danish farmland and stolen from the museum by a German goldsmith, a loss which in Danish poetry was made venerable by Adam Oehlenschläger in his romantic, idealistic memento that we shall not prefer the value of gold to the value of spiritual, religious, national truth. It may be unfair to our great writer of epic existential prose to let him be represented here by openly didactic verse, but he gave it to accompany his portrait, and the meaning of this poem is not far from the epicenter of his oeuvre.

Johannes V. Jensen

As for Johannes V. Jensen, I must admit in advance that I consider him to be not only the greatest poet and writer of the three Nobel laureates, but also second to none in Danish literature. This is not as self-evident in Denmark today as it used to be, although his early novel Kongens Fald [The Fall of the King], 1900-1901, was chosen as the best Danish novel of the last century by the majority of readers of the two principal Copenhagen dailies in the year 2000. Johannes V. Jensen himself much preferred his six-volume sequence of evolutionary myths under the title of Den lange Rejse [The Long Trail], 1908-1922. That work tells the story of mankind from the beginnings a million years ago to the arrival in America of Christopher Columbus, the great seafarer of Danish extraction (as Grundtvig supposed, and Jensen suggested)—along with the Spanish. Johannes V. Jensen writes in his autobiography for the Nobel Foundation that he attempted with his work to turn his readers'
attention from French aesthetics to Anglo-American fact, to the real
world around us, from Baudelaire to Frank Norris as I see it, and
from local defeat to our expansion in history and positive action
now. "With Darwin for Denmark," so to speak. There is, however,
at the center of almost everything written by this magician of Danish
language—who said that he preferred journalism to fiction, that he
wrote in order to let poetry be surpassed by reality—there is a
lesson of death. He wished to let the apparently disappearing
influence of Christianity and Church continue to disappear and, if
possible, to accelerate its disappearance. But he did not propagate
against religion, for he understood the terrible importance of
metaphysical panic. This panic is the shocking subject in his two
novels about life in America. There is a criminal quasi-fascist
dictator called Cancer underway in those novels, building with
terror and sex appeal on the existing ruins of religion his empire
over the souls of men in Chicago and the States. Jensen also
immediately sensed the danger when Hitler began his ascent in the
early twenties. He wrote against totalitarianism of any kind, but
perhaps most important, he never missed a chance to remind us that
life is short, and we must be prepared to die without hope of any
permanence in anything. This sort of social therapy is much needed
in our time, he felt, if we shall overcome fear and yet live without
giving in to metaphysical and political humbug and seduction.

He has written wonderful poems and songs. His early poems (in
his Digte,[Poems] 1906) are often considered most important. As late
as 1945, he himself said that his poetry in general was the essence of
his oeuvre.

Alting forgaar.  Everything dies.
Alting forgaar.  Everything dies.
Elsker du mig?  Do you love me?
Jeg elsker dig.  I do love you. 4

This four-liner by Johannes V. Jensen I consider the quintessence
of all he wrote. It is written as a text to accompany the sound of the
town hall bells in Copenhagen, a melody by Thomas Laub played by
those bells every hour on the hour since 1905, and still transmitted
by the Danish public service radio every day of the year at noon. I wish you could hear it now, as it was heard at the conference in Des Moines. Do you understand the poem?

Bibliography


1 All translations are by Erik M. Christensen.
2 Karl Gjellerup, in his poems Min Kjærligheds Bog, 1889 [Book of My Love].
3 Henrik Pontoppidan, in the periodical Juleroser, 1903 [Christmas Flowers] under his own portrait by Johan Rohde.
4 Johannes V. Jensen, in his prose myth "Den gamle Trold" [The Old Troll], Nye Myter, 1908 [New Myths].