

ART AND RELIGION IN THE POETRY OF ELIZABETH JENNINGS

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Abstract:

Elizabeth Jennings is a 20th Century woman poetess belonging to the 1950s, associated with Movement Poetry. Her poetry deals with many important ideas related to life, death, love, art, separation, isolation and religion. This paper tries to analyze and focus on Art and Religion as major themes with a selection of poems from her Anthologies.

Key Words: *Movement Poetry, Art and Religion.*

An important theme in Jennings' poetry is the theme of art. The art poems illustrate the poet's intent to look at this subject from diverse angles. In her poem "Visit to an Artist" the connection between the visitor, the artist and his art is described. The creation of works of art and the reason for their composition are described in "Works of Art", "In a Picture Gallery" is a poem in which Jennings paints a unusual kind of world of art. The concluding poem in this selection "Questions to other Artists" portrays the artists' feelings in the face of inspiration. Since the creation of art is Jennings foremost activity she has written a number of poems about this theme. When Jennings was asked in the interview by Gerlinde Gramang "What does Art mean to you? She replied: I don't think art is therapy. I don't think art is a substitute for something. I am very clumsy and I hate it. I would rather pull a door when it says push. This might be the reason why I like the order of poetry. Poetry is communication. When I feel a poem is all right, I will show it to somebody. But, of course you can't have that in your mind when you are writing. I think the things we share are more interesting than the things that separate us." Therefore Art for is a kind of sharing bond with others.

Her entrance into the World of Art is made in "Vision to an Artist" from the *Collected Poems* (1961) This poem consists of three stanzas; the first one has six lines and the second and third has five lines each. Some of the lines are rhyming but not all of them. From the title of the poem we learn that the poem intends to describe a visit to an artist. The poem is devoted to David Jones and we get the feeling that it is he we are going to visit.

In the first stanza the view we get while looking out of a window is described. Wherever we look we see nothing but the sea. The air and the water are described as being perfectly "mingled". Everything is well arranged and there is no disorder. All is well arranged and so we get the impression that the view which is described is not necessarily a real one but could just as well be painted in a picture. The line "But nothing was confused and nothing slow:" makes it clear about the smooth flow of thoughts and motion. In the second stanza the relationship between the visitor and the artist is described. The shyness which existed between them at the beginning has been "drawn into the pictures on the wall" and so there is a quite intimacy between them now. They do not feel the need to talk. The only thing they want is to look at the pictures and experience the effect they cause. The silence between the visitor and the artist is felt as a relief, because it is not necessary anymore to look for the right words. In the third stanza the visitor uses the silence to think about words the artist had said before. Art is brought into relation with religion by describing it as a sacrament. In this stanza she creates an image of art "A mountain under the calm form of paint/Much like the Presence under wine and bread" (101). The effect the paintings have is described as being almost holy. It is of such greatness that we should face it with respect.

The last line of the poem tries to show art between “its largesse and its own restraint”. Art is not unlimited, and so the poet tries to define its borderlines. Real art has to be found somewhere in the middle between these two features. Through this equilibrium art can impart which is closely linked with the experience of Christ's body and blood transformed into wine and bread. The poem second poem “Works of Art” (1964) is from the *Collected Poems* and is a search for order. It consists of four stanzas with six lines each. It is written in a very regular form with every stanza rhyming ababab. In this poem Jennings talks about the creation of works of art. She tries to find out why we are interested in art, what we are looking for in it, and the feelings which are involved when works of art come into existence.

In the first stanza the world of art is related to escape and the fact that very often we try to find shelter in it. It is order the poet is mainly attracted by and the feeling of security which can be won through that. She refers to the world of art as “that cool, wide world where even shadows are/ ordered and relegated to a shape”. The word “shadows” point to “hear” or “sun” that provided inspiration and the drive to create. It is coolness a sense of satisfaction that is found after the creation of works of art. It stands for the release from the heat of inspiration. In the second stanza of this poem we are made aware of the fact that there is, however, not only rational thinking involved in art but also inspiration and surprise. Whenever the artist has an idea he can never predict what the final version of his work will be like. In addition the artist gets involved with his work of art even when he feels “uncommitted at the start”. He develops a relationship to it, because it only through him that it came into existence.

In the third stanza the poet tries to find an explanation for the existence of the works of art. She quotes Yeats, who saw the reason in gaiety. By referring to Hamlet and Lear who were particularly not gay characters, Jennings makes use of irony. In this stanza we also find reference to religion. It is stated that there was no art in paradise, and that it only came into being after we had to face “our dangerous liberty”. This is seen as the reason why art is constantly looking for this lost order and security, which existed in the Garden of Eden.

It is however not possible for human beings to achieve perfect order and security. This is the reason why the poet talks of a bitter sweetness and a “taste of frustration” that is closely linked with the creation of works of art. In this stanza we are reminded of the ideas stated in the first one. This constant search for order keeps us going and gives us hope for the moment of discovery. The last two lines of the poem sum up the theme of the poem. We will not find perfect order in art but we can achieve at least is a certain coolness, which, as mentioned before, stands for the release after the creation of a piece of art. In the last line of the poem Jennings makes use of complex image: “And shadows draw attention to the sun”. This could be interpreted as meaning that we cannot reach perfection represented by the sun, and so we have to concentrate on the shadows which are linked inextricably with the sun, and so we have to concentrate on shadows. Concentrating on shadows might lead to the right path to the sun.

“In a Picture Gallery” (1975) is also from *Collected Poems* and is about Escape into the world of Art. As in the previous poem the world of art is described as a different kind of world. This poem only consists of two stanzas with six lines each and has, like the previous poem, the rhyme ababab. Whereas the poem “Works of Art” is written in more general mode, this poem includes another person. This can be seen from the pronouns “we, us, you” etc. The poem also contains a question which seems to be addressed to another person as well. What creates the quality of the poem is the frequent use of rich imagery, which underlines the idea of the creation of a different world. Jennings talks about a “gallery of air” and “paintings through/ which we can climb” (323) The feeling of unlimitedness which is created by the use of the word “air” helps us to cross the borders to a different world. By looking intensively at paintings the entrance into the new world is very successfully described with the idea of actually climbing into picture.

We can wander around between the different parts of the painting and discover a new world of understanding. We not only stay in the world of painting; we also enter a world of sound. This is adroitly indicated by the question “Do you hear/ A murmur of continued flight?” (323) On our journey we seem to

have reached a state where different types of art have reached universality; they cannot be distinguished any more from each other. Mysteriously, we seem to be surrounded by them. Elizabeth Jennings expresses this idea by saying "Paint, sound and word are everywhere." The combination of paintings and music is very well expressed with the beautiful image: "Are paintings far or are we near/ This texture of, this sound of sight?" The poet does not seem to be sure herself which kind of world we have reached. We are left with this definite feeling of being lost in space. It is, however, not an unpleasant feeling. The use of alliteration in this image creates an atmosphere of harmony. Sound even equals sight. We just seem to be far removed from reality. This might even remind us of the previous poem, in which Jennings talks about an escape into a different world.

In this poem we are left with an open end. The question which asked is not answered by the poet. We are left in this world of art, in which the poet is guided us, and have to find the exit ourselves. It is, however, up to us how long we intend to stay. "Questions to Other Artists" (1977) is from the Anthology *Consequently I Rejoice* and it is about inspiration and art. This poem is different from the proceeding ones. It does not describe the world of art in the same way. The "I" of the poem asks a composer and a painter what they feel when suddenly their inspiration disappears. The question is asked, what could be done in such a case? Not only is this poem different as far as the content is concerned, it is also the form of the poem which is far more irregular than the previous ones. It consists of four stanzas with five or six fairly short lines each. The rhythm is irregular as well and the lines seldom rhyme. The irregularity of the poem is used to underline the state of dumbness that is caused by the loss of inspiration. In this poem Jennings makes use of imagery and of simile. When she addresses the composer she talks about "the dance of notes"; when she talks to the painter she wants to know "Does a canvas stare like a flouting love?", or what he does "When the brushes start/ Shaking to a pause". With this use of imagery and simile the artist's fear is expressed in moments when inspiration ceases. There is also the fear that creativity and inspiration might be lost totally one day. The "I" of the poem wants to know how other artists cope with the feeling of dumbness.

In the last stanza of the poem the poet expresses the feeling of gratefulness which is felt when inspiration is present. She wonders whether other artists know this feeling when inspiration comes back after a long time. Jennings ends this poem with a simile in which the inspiration of words is compared with the feeling of a host on the tongue. The connection of art and religion is a theme frequently present in the poetry of Jennings.

Theme of Religion:

The following selection of poems shows the importance religion has for her as a practicing Catholic. The first poem in this selection "For a Child Born Dead" is about the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary and the doubts she feels. In "Harvest and Consecration" a vision of rebirth is offered. In "To a Friend with a Religious Vocation" the poet not only admires her friend's religious vocation but also tries to define her own religious convictions and the effect they have on her life as a poet. The final poem of this selection, "Crucifixion" is about Christ's suffering on the cross and depicts salvation and hope for mankind. Jennings religious poems are not always successful as they are not able to create their own atmosphere and therefore often seem colorless.

"The Annunciation" (1958) is a poem from the *Collected Poems* and it talks about The Immaculate Conception of Virgin Mary. The poet tries to describe Mary's emotional state after the angel has told her that she will give birth to Jesus Christ. We find her in a state of ecstasy after the angel has left her. She focuses very slowly on her surroundings again. Jennings is interested in the conflict Mary had to go through in this situation, When the angel left her she is portrayed in a confused state. Only familiar things in her room seem to comfort her and she no longer knows how to pray. When a foreign body enters the mother's body there are already mental and physical changes and pains and secondly the angel words are challenging because it is the God's child she is going to give birth to. She realizes that she has to live with this child which is a part of her at the same time God's child. The only way she sees for her to be able to cope

with this is to carry on normally with her life. Jennings writes that “from her ecstasy she moves/ And turns to human things at last”. The human aspect of Mary to the purely spiritual one is also emphasized.

What is further referred to is the relationship Mary establishes with the child in her body. We are made aware that it is human child that she loves. At the same time, however, she feels the greatness of the event. She will be able to give birth to the Son of God, the savior of mankind. This is the reason why “great salvations grip her side”. The poem consists of four stanzas with six lines each, partly rhyming. Jennings herself is a practicing Christian, tries to describe this important truth of Catholic religion. In order to describe such a great moment one would expect the poet to make frequent use of imagery to be able to grasp the full meaning and importance of it. This is not achieved by her but instead simple words are used to describe Mary's feelings. By doing this, she sacrifices the possibility of expressing the uniqueness of this event through images which might emphasize it. The poem remains a simple one without achieving a state of memorability.

The poem “Harvest and Consecration” deals with the theme of rebirth and it also appears in the *Collected Poems*. In this poem the corn harvest in autumn is compared with the Mass and the breaking of bread. While the poet describes this season and the collection of the cornsheaves she suddenly thinks about Mass. The corn which can feed many hungry people is compared to “white bread”, referring to the host of the altar, which offers a means to be reborn. God is included both in the bread and in the host. The poem not only uses the form “I”; there is also a “you” which seems to refer to a priest. The “I” appears to tell him all her thoughts about the parallels she finds between corn and the bread. The description is passionate. The poet even tries to describe the feelings of a priest during the consecration. She compares him with a midwife and a mother at the same time. For her, he seems to perfectly unite pain and pleasure. The priest, however, does not agree with her. In the last stanza of the poem he explains that it is impossible to unite passion and consecration. When the “I” of the poem has another look at the cornsheaves it becomes clear that is wrong merely to concentrate on simple. It is even necessary that simple things die in order to open our eyes for the hidden and more important things. Jennings ends this poem with a very interesting line. “I see/ The wine and bread protect our ecstasy” (761) Too much passion is seen as dangerous, because it destroys humility. The respect for the consecration of wine and bread is a holy process and therefore we are expected to accept it with humility.

“To a friend with a Religious Vocation” (1960) offers Different Types of Religious Conviction This poem is taken from Elizabeth Jennings latest poetry volume and is a part of her “Easter Sequence”, which consists of eight parts. Apart from the poem mentioned above there are the poems “The Start of Holy Week”, “Holy Week”, “The Eternal Cross”, “Holy Sunday”, “Easter”, “Easter Morning” and “The Ascension”. The poem consists of five stanzas with five lines each. As usual, it is written in traditional form and follows the rhyme-scheme ababa. The poem is about the importance of Easter for mankind and the meaning of Christ's suffering on the cross. He leads us to a better life. We are expected to have confidence in this world and participate in improving it.

The first line of the poem starts with a contrast: “Always the same and always the new.” She then describes the nails which are hammered “upon our maps”. The nails in this context are symbols of suffering which we can find everywhere in the world. However there is hope left. There are also moments of doubt which make us think. Easter is one of those moments. Christ was put on the cross to bear the suffering of mankind. Jennings reminds us that people who “copy the God of saving” and suffer for other people and for justice combat the evil in the world.

It is mainly this element of hope that is stressed when the poet talks to Easter. We are not lost and neither is the world we live in. What Easter tells us is to “Honour this world that's not beyond repair.” The best way to do this is “compassion”, a word which is very important for Jennings. To think of people who are around us and to try and understand them with their faults is what really counts in life. With this poem Jennings has once again proved that she is able to write beautiful skilful poems, which gain a great deal of

their power through the optimistic positive outlook they offer. Only when we concentrate on things which are worth improving, can we make this world a little better.

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