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Introduction



Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872) takes up a position in the life and culture of Denmark which is unique. He is one of the most original poets in the language, and his best work, to be found in the hymns he wrote for the Danish Lutheran Church, has also made his poetry perhaps the best loved of all literary works in Danish. Furthermore, his view of Christianity and its relation to secular culture has left an indelible mark on the life of Danish society in all its aspects from church life and education to political affairs and economic activities. Grundtvig also made memorable contributions to Anglo-Saxon philology and to the study of mythology and history. Finally his personal development, as it is known to us through his diaries, poetry, sermons and essays, is in itself a fascinating saga about the way an unusual and powerful personality relates and reacts to the events and ideas of the 19th century and constantly struggles to understand the mystery of man and his destiny in history.

Grundtvig was born at the parsonage of Udby in South Zealand on 8th September 1783. He came into the world when the Kingdom of Denmark had enjoyed a long span of peace, and when trade and commerce with the Far East and the West Indies brought a hitherto unknown prosperity to the middle classes, while some measure of reform to relieve the social oppression and economic misery of the peasantry was inaugurated. Grundtvig's father was a gentle learned clergyman who held to a pietist orthodoxy at a time when the Danish Church was dominated by theological Rationalism. Both Grundtvig's parents came from families of clerics and civil servants. His strong-minded mother belonged to a kin that traced its ancestry back to a renowned noble family of the Danish middle ages. Grundtvig was the youngest of four children and was brought up with a sister, one year

his senior. They were looked after by an old nurse-maid whose store of popular beliefs and legends made a deep impression on the child. At an astonishingly early age Grundtvig browsed over historical chronicles in his father's library. Among his earliest recollections is the announcement of the prelude to the French Revolution by the radical local schoolmaster.

At the age of nine Grundtvig was farmed out with his father's former curate at the parsonage of Thyregod, Jutland. The pastor offered board and tuition to sons of the clergy whom he prepared for the grammar school. Grundtvig was well and humanely taught and always remembered his kind and open-minded tutor with affection. The dark heathlands around Thyregod, so different from the lush rolling scenery of his native region, made a lasting impression on the boy, as did the ways and speech of the Jutish peasants.

After First Communion in 1798 Grundtvig was admitted to the senior form of the grammar school at Aarhus, Jutland. Later in his life he described his school years as a dreadful stultifying grind mainly devoted to the classics, Hebrew and scripture. On his own Grundtvig read history.

Grundtvig matriculated at the University of Copenhagen in 1800 as a student of divinity, to which field of study, on his own admission, he devoted himself with little diligence and faith. He soon exchanged the stern orthodoxy in which he had been brought up for the theological Rationalism of the day. In spite of modest means Grundtvig took part in the usual undergraduate life: amateur acting, card-playing, pipe-smoking and drinking, but also found time for reading modern literature and history. Thanks to an energetic spurt of swotting before his finals he nonetheless passed his degree exams with a first-class mark. As a graduate he went deeper into historical and literary studies while continuing the versifying and writing he had begun at an earlier date. He tried his hand unsuccessfully at various genres from comic verse and comedy to novellas with Norse themes and a Sternean novel. The career of a writer seems to have been his ambition rather than that of the pulpit. During this time his interest in Norse literature led him to the study of the Old Norse Language.

In 1805 the state of his finances made him accept a position as a tutor with a land-owning family at the Manor of Egeløkke in the island of Langeland in the Baltic. He was to teach a seven-year old boy, a task he pursued with extraordinary energy and seriousness. It was not easy for the somewhat uncouth young academic to adapt to

the polite ways of the gentry, but after a while he engaged himself in the life of the local community, preaching in the Church and taking the initiative in founding a reading society.

The most important event of his island existence was, however, that from the very first day he fell in love with the beautiful mistress of the Manor, Mrs Constance de Steensen Leth, his senior by six years. This unhappy and futureless passion drove him to the edge of despair and he nearly succumbed from the conflict between his raging desire and his strong moral sense, but his sufferings also roused him to a hitherto unknown self-awareness and released enormous spiritual and intellectual energies within him. Now he grasped the Romantics' view of the divinity of Nature and their idea of poetry as a revelation of the eternal to which he had been introduced by his kinsman, the philosopher Henrik Steffens, though without comprehending his words. He absorbed himself in romantic philosophy and poetry, the works of Schelling and Fichte and the poetry of Novalis and Oehlenschlaeger. He also read Goethe and Schiller as well as the poet, who was to become a life-long inspiration, William Shakespeare. Only for a time, however, did the romantic notion of the harmonization of all polarities by an intuitive vision satisfy him. Grundtvig followed another romantic lead as he sought for the divine universal spirit in the remote past, in ancient Scandinavian history and Norse mythology. He entered a stage in his development which he later with reference to the Norse name of the ancient gods called his *asamania*. Grundtvig saw in the myths of the North a reflection of the Eternal and an expression of the moral values and understanding of life of the Norsemen and rejected with scorn the current interpretation of myths as symbolic representations of natural phenomena. In essays on the Edda and the Norse pantheon and in a book, his "Norse Mythology" (1808) Grundtvig makes an original contribution to mythological scholarship as he selects the lays of the Edda as primary sources for our knowledge of Norse religion. In keeping with romantic thought he presents a unified vision of the myths. He sees them as a drama with a moral trend: the divine life of the gods is flawed by sensuality, breach of faith and murder all of which launches the events leading to Ragnarok, the end of the world, when the gods perish in a heroic battle against the giants, the forces of evil. The epilogue with the rebirth of the gods in evergreen plains to immortal life Grundtvig takes as a symbol both of religious hope and of national rebirth after the humiliation Denmark had suffered in the wars with England.

Grundtvig had by then become the ardent patriot he was to remain for the rest of his life.

By way of his *asamania*, during which for a time he thought of Scandinavian paganism as a manifestation of the Divine equal with Christianity, Grundtvig reverted to the Lutheran faith in which he had been raised. His development is evident in the two cycles of dramatic scenes with themes from Norse mythology and the heroic legends found in the *Edda*, which represent the most ambitious fruit of his early creativity as a poet. By 1808 Grundtvig had returned to Copenhagen where he immersed himself in historical studies while making a living as a publicist and a schoolmaster. He now seemed set upon an academic career.

Grundtvig gave expression to his orthodox Christian standpoint and his judgment of the Rationalist clergy of the day in his probationary sermon in 1810, which, when he had it printed, earned him a rebuke from the University Senate. Afterwards he turned the accusation of failing faith against himself, which threw him into a religious crisis. This in connection with over-work and Grundtvig's inbred manio-depressive disposition produced a mental collapse verging on insanity. On recovering he humbly accepted to become curate to his ailing father at Udby, and for two years with his wonted zeal Grundtvig devoted himself to preaching and pastoral work. In 1812 he worked up his notes for his teaching of history into a *Short Summary of a World Chronicle*. In his preface Grundtvig states it as his plan to write a theodicy of history, that is, he will show the birth of Christ as the central event in history and, by showing God's finger in the progress of mankind, prove the truth of Christianity through history. He also wants his book to serve as mirror to the ungodly present in Denmark and to call for Christian reform both in the Church and in national life. In spite of the unifying idea for his work, which Romanticism had taught him, Grundtvig does not succeed in carrying out his plan. Early history is very cursorily dealt with while his treatment of the period from the Reformation to the present day gives the main emphasis to the eighteenth century and the most recent times. The work, which is perhaps better described as a history of ideas than a general history, shows Grundtvig's impressive reading in European history and thought, but it is flawed by the author's often coarsely polemical dismissal of the thinkers and writers of the Age of Reason in France. His regained Christian orthodoxy makes him also turn on his former Romantic idols, particular Schelling, whose philosophy

of Nature is denounced as a godless naturalism. Grundtvig's world chronicle is, however, not to be read as an account of history, but as an example of how Grundtvig makes use of history to explore and clarify his view of existence. This also holds true of the revisions of the World Chronicle he made in 1814 and 1817. In the latter, without abandoning the christocentric view of history, Grundtvig recognizes that historical scholarship must be based on documented knowledge.

The World Chronicle of 1812, which went against the grain of all contemporary historical writing, gave occasion for the first of the many polemical bouts in which Grundtvig was involved during his lifetime. Grundtvig's condemnation of Schelling particularly outraged Hans Christian Oersted, the eminent physicist, who became Grundtvig's main adversary. This quarrel, combined with other writings and speeches in which Grundtvig passed judgment on the Church and the Nation, earned him a reputation as a turbulent priest and lost him his prospects of an academic career, just as it isolated him from the intellectual establishment of the day. As he did not want to be considered a fanatic and, besides was disappointed in the response to his preaching, Grundtvig laid down the cloth in 1815.

The years from 1815 to 1821 he has himself described as his historical period. In a periodical "Dannevirke," which he filled up singlehanded, he published translations of documents about national history, literary and historical essays and poems with historical and religious themes, all with the aim of promoting a revival of faith and a regeneration of national life. His main contribution in this respect is, however, his translations of the two principal literary moments of the Scandinavian middle ages, Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* and Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, the history of the Kings of medieval Norway. In his attempt to make these works attractive to the common reader Grundtvig adopts a popular style drawing on popular saws and proverbs as well as dialect vocabulary. An original achievement! which hardly succeeded in its aim to reach the people. In addition to these impressive philological feats Grundtvig did a translation of Beowulf, the original text of which had recently been published in Copenhagen for the first time.

The toil of his formidable translation tasks, which sequestered him in his study, had in the long run a deadening effect on him, and it was with some relief that he accepted a living at Præstø, Zealand in 1821, from which he moved on to the pulpit of the Church of Our Saviour in Copenhagen the following year.

Yet, he was still in the doldrums. He had misgivings about the usefulness of his historical writings for a national awakening, and the apology for Christianity he tried to write failed to satisfy him. An important inspiration from these years is, however, his reading of Irenæus's "Against the Heretics", which Grundtvig translated. Irenæus's emphasis on man as God's creation redeemed by Christ and his teaching about God's essence as life and love became of the greatest importance to the new view of Christianity that dawned on him. In the Advent Season of 1823 the ferment of his mind came to fruition: he was filled with a feeling of having become alive in every sense, as a believer, as a poet and as a national reformer. This whole process he has described in a long poem where he uses a myth, drawn from Saxo, as a foil for describing his own development, a heroic quest through a Nordic underworld of cold and shadows which ends when, led by a woman both personifying Denmark and life, he reaches the ice wall of death where, however, he receives a token of immortality from the other side. The preface of the poem contains a terse formulation of the way he now sees his task as a poet and as an educator of the nation: he is "to revive the Norse heroic spirit to Christian deeds along lines suitable to the needs and terms of the present day."

The elation and vitality, felt at the time, also contributed to a clarification of Grundtvig's view of Christianity. He came to realize that the word of God to man was not primarily the text of the Bible, but the audible word of God spoken at baptism and communion. It has been heard in the Church from the beginning, a living word, in which the Lord himself was present as he was in the sacraments. Upon this "matchless discovery" Grundtvig founds his historico-ecclesiastical view of Christianity which sets an epoch in the history of the Danish Church. In a sermon given on 31st July 1825 he proclaims his new position for the first time.

Grundtvig now felt that he was well armed against the modern scriptural criticism that had disquieted him. In August of the same year a young theologian and Bible scholar Professor H. N. Clausen published a book on "The Constitution of Catholicism and Protestantism. Doctrine and Ritual". Here he defines the Church as a "community for the promotion of general religiosity" and confirms that Holy Writ remains the foundation of faith, albeit as it is currently checked and corrected by biblical scholars. On reading this, Grundtvig erupted. In a pamphlet, stirring up much attention, "The Rejoinder of the Church", he denounces Clausen's teachings on all counts. His

concept of the Church is a “castle in the air” and his attitude to the Bible contradictory. Instead Grundtvig points to his own historico-ecclesiastical view as an irrefutable foundation of Christian faith. In violent terms he brands Clausen’s position as false and challenges him either to retract or lay down his office as a teacher and drop the name of a Christian.

To Grundtvig’s chagrin his opponent did not join in a debate but brought a law-suit for libel. In October 1826 the findings of the court went against Grundtvig, he was made to pay a fine and had censorship imposed on him, under which he remained until 1837. Some months previously Grundtvig had tendered his resignation from the pulpit once again. The immediate occasion for this was the church authorities’ refusal to allow him to use some hymns he had written commemorating the thousandth anniversary for the first Christian mission to Denmark in the service for Whitsunday.

Though both hurt and subdued over the outcome of this clash with the theological establishment, Grundtvig was heartened to find that he had followers both among the clergy and the laity in his struggle. In a periodical founded by two of his academic disciples he wrote two articles substantiating his theological position. He also penned a longish essay “On the Freedom of Religion”, which was suppressed by the authorities. In these years he considered the idea of founding a free church and, in 1831 even prepared a petition to the King for permission to establish one. He also toyed with the idea of emigrating to Norway or England where he hoped to find freer conditions under which to live and work.

In 1828 he returned to his interest in the heroic past and obtained a grant from the King to go to England to study and copy Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, which he believed contained the earliest sources for Scandinavian history and literature.

During the summers of 1829, 1830 and 1831 Grundtvig visited England and did unearth and copy Anglo-Saxon manuscripts that had hitherto been neglected and ignored. Though nothing came of his plans to publish them, Grundtvig is still a pioneer of Anglo-Saxon scholarship by drawing the attention of English scholars to their cultural heritage. But Grundtvig’s main benefit was not to be in the field of learning. It was the life of the present day in England that became his main interest. To be true, at first England was a disappointment to him, he found the English dull and inhospitable, he had difficulty with the language, and the Anglican Church struck him as entirely lifeless.