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NATIONALIST ORIGINS OF THE FOLK HIGH SCHOOL: THE ROMANTIC VISIONS OF N.F.S. GRUNDTVIG

by E. F. FAIN, *Instructor, Florida State University*

Outside his native country of Denmark, Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig's fame rests mainly on his role as founder of the folk high school movement. Grundtvig, when he is thought about at all, is conceived of primarily as an educator, and there is general acknowledgement that the folk high school was an unusually successful variety of pedagogical invention.¹ In English articles and books, Grundtvig has often been portrayed as a kind of Danish Thomas Arnold, who substituted bacon and the cooperatives for games and Latin.² His ideas are sometimes considered against a backdrop of nineteenth-century Danish events, but almost never set into the general context of nineteenth-century European cultural history. This is unfortunate, for Grundtvig's folk high school idea stemmed directly from his concepts of romantic nationalism, and many aspects of the folk high school can be properly understood only in terms of that kind of nationalism.³

Grundtvig studies done in Denmark are of course quite different in focus. There, almost every aspect of Grundtvig's life and his important role in Danish national history has received attention. In recent times, his accomplishments as a theologian, a poet, and a cultural leader have evoked considerably more interest than his accomplishments as an educator. His position as a national great man is taken for granted; his genius and originality are accepted without question, and his texts have been examined in minute, reverent fashion. Nonetheless, as in the English studies, Grundtvig's place in the general European stream of cultural nationalism is rarely considered. In part, there may be some

¹ Even Paul Goodman is a folk high school enthusiast. In *Compulsory Mis-Education*, he talks of the need for 'colleges for the altogether non-bookish, who nevertheless want to be informed and cultured citizens, and to share in the experience of a college community. A model is to hand in the remarkable Danish Folk-Schools, where youngsters who have left school to go to work can return between the ages of 18 and 25 . . .' (N.Y., Vintage, 1966), 153.

² See, for instance, Noëlle Davies' *Education for Life* (London, Williams & Norgate, 1931) or Sir Michael Sadler's introduction to Holger Begtrup's *The Folk High Schools of Denmark and the Development of a Farming Community* (London, Oxford University Press, 1936).

³ The only book which seems to focus on Grundtvig's cultural nationalism is Erica Simon's *Réveil National et Culture Populaire en Scandinavie; La Genèse de la Højskole Nordique, 1844-78* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1960). Miss Simon is concerned only with Scandinavia, however, and she does not attempt to consider Grundtvig in terms of the German romantic nationalist tradition.

reluctance among Danes to view Grundtvig in any manner other than as a unique product of Denmark.¹ The chief reason for Grundtvig's isolated historical position, however, is undoubtedly that Scandinavian cultural history has never quite been woven into the fabric of continental cultural history. Many factors account for this—among them the geographic position of Scandinavia in relation to the major continental centres, the small population, the rural economy and the inability of Denmark and Sweden in modern times to maintain their positions as great powers. These factors in turn have affected the use and spread of the Scandinavian languages among foreigners. In the twentieth century, it is the specialist historian outside Norway, Sweden or Denmark who knows a Scandinavian language, whereas French and German are absolutely basic for anyone working in the field of European history. Scandinavian cultural history is rather like the history of education in that it has developed traditionally as a separate discipline. Thus, Grundtvig has been a prominent figure in two varieties of what must be regarded as essentially provincial history.

The Danish historian Poul Georg Lindhardt has suggested that problems of translation are primarily responsible for the failure of Grundtvig to be as internationally influential as Kierkegaard or Hans Christian Andersen.

'His works are difficult to understand, and even more difficult to translate. Clear thinking and concise expressions were not for him; he called himself a bard (*skjald*), and the language of the bard is not always clear, although it is often profound.'²

It is undoubtedly the case that good translations of Grundtvig's prose (his poetry, of course, presents special problems) would be difficult to execute, though probably not any more difficult than of Kierkegaard's. In my view, however, the chief obstacle to a wide dissemination of Grundtvig's notions lies elsewhere. It is that Grundtvig was so bound up with the idea of a Danish national character,³ an idea in turn tied to a mystic conception of the Danish language as an expression of *Volksgeist*, that he cannot be read in isolation from a consideration of the

¹ According to the Danish theologian Kaj Thaning, it is accepted dogma in Grundtvigian circles that Grundtvig is untranslatable because of being especially Danish. Even in two Danish books on the genesis of Grundtvig's ideas—*Grundtvig og Romantiken* by Carl Scharling (Copenhagen, Nordisk Forlag, 1947) and *Tilblivelsen af Grundtvig's Historiesyn* by William Michelsen (Copenhagen, Nordisk Forlag, 1954)—the stress is very definitely placed on a delineation of Grundtvig's differences from Fichte, Herder, Schelling and Schlegel, even when the differences are trivial.

² *Grundtvig: An Introduction* (London, S.P.C.K., 1951), 1.

³ Erica Simon has expressed a somewhat similar position: '... Grundtvig est si spécifiquement danois qu'il est difficile, au contraire de son contemporain Søren Kierkegaard, de le présenter aux lecteurs étrangers, qui du reste l'ignorent toujours... Cependant on a pu dire de son œuvre qu' "elle est l'expression, non pas peut-être la plus claire, mais certainement la plus puissante, de la lutte spirituelle du peuple danois pour arriver à la conscience de lui-même".' *Réveil National et Culture Populaire en Scandinavie*, 11.

nineteenth-century cultural nationalist scene.¹ To understand what Grundtvig meant by 'the living word', for example, it is quite essential to grasp the force of the tradition—a tradition rooted in German pietistic Lutheranism—which fought vigorously against the use of Latin and French so that the true, original Ur-spirit of the people might emerge. Similarly, it is difficult to see why Grundtvig so hated the Latin schools (or, as he called them, the 'black schools') unless one understands the cultural nationalist and Protestant premises which lie beneath the arguments.

That the problem is not primarily translation is underscored by considering the case of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, the Norwegian writer and patriot whose position as national hero of Norway is similar to Grundtvig's in Denmark. Bjørnson's major plays and novels were translated into English not long after their initial appearance in Norway, yet one cannot read them with any interest unless one appreciates the particular social and political background which gave rise to them. Bjørnson always wrote in terms of the causes he was espousing, and his characters—unlike Ibsen's—are often mere mouthpieces for propaganda. Lacking the sentimental attachment which a Norwegian national is likely to bring in advance to a figure like Bjørnson, or a Danish national to a figure like Grundtvig, one must endeavour to reconstruct the atmosphere in which these men acted in order to understand why they excited so much local attention.

The cultural nationalist movement in nineteenth-century Scandinavia is in any case of interest because it can be examined free of the sinister overtones which emanate from its counterpart movement in Germany. The Herder-to-Hitler theme, stated perhaps most baldly by the not-quite-respectable Peter Viereck in his *Metapolitics: the Roots of the Nazi Mind* (1961) but hinted at delicately by almost every other non-German writer on German history, has received wide play. Briefly, the argument runs that doctrines of romanticism led directly to doctrines of 'Volkish' thought, and these led—if perhaps less directly—to racist thought and Nazism. The connections have been stated in different ways, but perhaps the most interesting treatment to examine in conjunction with Grundtvig's ideas is that of George Mosse's in his book *The Crisis of Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (1964). Mosse characterizes 'Volkish' thought as containing the following elements: the union of a group of people with a transcendental essence or spirit, the special role of history in explaining human destiny, the idealization of the peasant and rural life, the idealization of the past and the primitive (the search for *Ur*-things) and the nation as a spiritual essence rather than as a political identity. He states:

'In order to be truly effective, a system of ideas must permeate important social and political institutions. And before 1918 the Volk-centered

¹ John Dewey once observed that the nineteenth century was 'the time when the idea of the *Volks-Seele*, the *Volks-Geist* was born; and the idea lost no time in becoming a fact'. *German Philosophy and Politics* (N.Y., Holt, 1915), 82.

ideology penetrated one of the most important of such institutions, the educational establishment.’¹

Most of Mosse’s book is indeed a detailed accounting of the penetration of Volkish ideas into German educational circles. These ideas, he claims, paved the way for the Nazis.

Certainly most of Grundtvig’s proposals would have to be labelled ‘Volkish’. Further, there is absolutely no question about the tremendous influence of Grundtvigian thought in Denmark, and particularly in Danish education. Since the Danes turned out to be quite immune to Nazi ideology, however, a study of Grundtvig in terms of his romantic nationalist outlook may well provide a most interesting counter-example to the causal contentions espoused by so many current commentators on German cultural history. The Herder-to-Hitler theme has of course been attacked from other quarters as well. Isaiah Berlin, for example, thinks that the standard interpretations of Herder’s ideas are much oversimplified, and he goes on to say that

‘... it is an historical and moral error to identify the ideology of one period with its consequences at some other, or with its transformation in another context and in combination with other factors. The progeny of Herder in, let us say, England or America, are to be found principally among those amateurs who became absorbed in the antiquities and forms of life (ancient and modern) of cultures other than their own, in Asia and Africa or the “backward” provinces of Europe or America; among professional travellers and collectors of ancient song and poetry, among enthusiastic and sometimes sentimental devotees of more primitive forms of life in the Balkans or among the Arabs; nostalgic *émigrés* and exiles like Richard Burton, Doughty, Lafcadio Hearn, the English companions of Gandhi or Ibn Saud; as well as serious students and philosophers of language and society.’²

Like so many nineteenth-century writers, philosophers and leaders of what the French historian Erica Simon terms ‘*les pays protestants*’, Grundtvig (1783–1872) spent his childhood in a Lutheran country parsonage. These parsonages were pervaded by an atmosphere of bourgeois piety, with family prayers and hymn-singing an important part of daily life. In Copenhagen, such doctrines of the Enlightenment as natural religion had already inspired the growth of a rationalist-oriented clergy, but Grundtvig’s father was an old-fashioned orthodox minister. Orthodox Lutheranism in Denmark, unlike German orthodox Lutheranism, contained within it many pietistic elements, for King Christian VI (reign: 1730–46) had supported the pietists and, as head of the State Church, had decreed and enforced a series of pietistic reforms.

The Lutheran country parsonage as ‘*eine Urzelle des Geisteslebens*’ is an interesting theme, and it has been dealt with in some detail by

¹ *The Crisis of German Ideology*, 5.

² ‘J. G. Herder,’ *Encounter* 25 (July 1965), 44.

Robert Minder.¹ He points out that the translation of the Bible into the vernacular brought the prophets and apostles into a new light; it was as if the Biblical characters, now that they spoke a familiar language, had come personally to dwell in Protestant homes. The world of the spirit became a daily affair. Minder discusses a phenomenon noticed by other historians—that as Latin theology was thrust into the background by the pietists, native literary impulses seemed to be unlocked. In Protestant Switzerland and Germany, a noticeable revival of secular literature (especially lyric poetry) accompanied the pietistic movement. Most of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century cultural leaders of the German Protestant realm (Lessing, Hölderlin, Herder, Schleiermacher and Schelling, for example) were in fact the sons of pietistic Lutheran ministers.

When these sons left their rural homes and came to the cities, where Enlightenment doctrines in one form or another held sway and where the vernacular language was still looked upon as the property of country yokels, they tended to feel estranged. They longed for the comfort of their childhood nests, where they could speak their mother-tongue with ease and sing the hymns which gave them such joy. In their minds, the rural parsonages in which they had grown up were transformed into a kind of idyll, where life was a golden amalgam of the family, nature, the simple ways and Jesus. (When Grundtvig first attended the University of Copenhagen, he was somewhat influenced by less orthodox and more enlightened theological views, but after his emotional collapse in 1810, he found relief in a return to the religion of his childhood—a religion uncomplicated by vexing problems of theological doctrine and Latin texts.) The nightmare for the pietistic pastor's son, according to Minder, was to be away from home—a home warmed by the rituals of family life and the aura of Christ—and to awaken in a foreign city to the horror of a cold, emotionless church, with a minister carrying out dry, mechanical rituals to honour a God from whom all love and joy had been removed. Some of the more emancipated pastors' sons, like Hölderlin, combined their glowing vision of home with a sort of pseudo-Hellenistic dream. Others spoke of snug rooms, of calm countenances, of children's faces alight with a kind of bright joy, of the local landscape and the glories of nature, of the family dinner, of Mother. In Germany, this kind of characterization was sometimes used in literature to illustrate German profundity as against Jewish shallowness or the admirable Protestant sense of duty as against Austrian-Catholic '*Schlamperei*'. Certainly no sharper critic existed of the pietistic symphony pastorale than the very urbane, very Jewish Heinrich Heine. He was one of the first to point out that Luther, by liberating the Word and the Spirit, had set off revolutionary impulses

¹ 'Das Bild des Pfarrhauses in der deutschen Literatur von Jean Paul bis Gottfried Benn,' in *Kultur und Literatur in Deutschland und Frankreich; Fünf Essays* (Frankfurt, Im Insel-Verlag, 1962), 44-72.

in the parsonages which were still undergoing transformation. German Idealism, he thought, was a late form of that revolution.

Early on, Grundtvig developed a taste for the ideas and activities which were to preoccupy him throughout his life: (1) the Nordic pagan myths, which he first heard from his mother, (2) Lutheranism, especially the hymns and the Little Catechism and (3) the study of history. His father's library, which consisted chiefly of theological treatises, contained a few works by Danish authors on universal and Danish history, and these the boy devoured.¹ After being tutored privately by his father and then by another minister, he attended *gymnasium* in Aarhus and in 1800 entered the University of Copenhagen as a theology student. As a mature man, Grundtvig claimed frequently to have disliked intensely his formal schooling, but it has been argued that he habitually exaggerated this matter and that independent evidence shows him to have been an eager pupil.² In any case, he acquitted himself in a respectable fashion both at *gymnasium* and the university. Later, in fact, when he was attacking the use of Latin in the schools, he would often take care to point out first that he himself had received a good grade in his Latin examinations. While at the University, Grundtvig's historical interests continued to be keen; he taught himself Icelandic so that he could read the old chronicles.

Denmark in 1800 (which included Norway, Slesvig and Holstein) was a prosperous agricultural kingdom ruled by the nobility and the upper classes. The peasants, who had been released from feudal tenure and granted land by royal decree in 1788, comprised about eighty-five per cent of the population. In the larger towns, and in the duchies of Slesvig and Holstein, the most pervasive cultural influence came from Germany. The cultured classes spoke and read German; quite a few were actually half-German. Although many Danes—for example, the great playwright and poet of the eighteenth century, Ludvig Holberg—admired intellectual trends in England, the institutions and general stamp of Danish cultural life resembled most closely the kind to be found in German towns. As we shall see, Grundtvig's ideas were very definitely in the German tradition, despite the fact that he spent some time in England and stated frequently that his visits there had turned him into a 'realist'.

The seminal intellectual event of Copenhagen in decades, an event regarded as a landmark by all Danish cultural historians, was a series of lectures presented in 1802 by Henrik Steffens, a young Norwegian who had studied with Schelling in Germany. Steffens electrified his audiences with the new (for Denmark) doctrines of romanticism, and he is credited with having inspired the Danish romantic poetry movement led by Adam Oehlenschläger. Grundtvig, who was living in Copenhagen at

¹ William Michelsen's study, *Tilblielsen af Grundtvig's Historiesyn*, has information about every book Grundtvig read during his childhood.

² See Scharling, *Grundtvig og Romantiken*, 10.

the time of the lectures, was a member of the audience. His diaries indicate, however, that he was quite uncomprehending and unmoved by Steffens' ideas. It was only after an abortive love affair with a married woman in 1805 (an affair acknowledged by all to be one of the central events of Grundtvig's life), when he experienced a kind of spiritual awakening, that he began to read German romantic poetry and philosophy.¹ Between 1805 and 1810, he steeped himself in the works of Herder, Schelling, Fichte and Schlegel.

A terrible depression descended on Grundtvig in 1810, a depression so debilitating that he had to be sent home to his father's rectory at Udby. Wrestling with Lutheran doctrine, romantic philosophy, sexual temptations and hallucinations of the devil, he turned simultaneously to a literal interpretation of the Bible and to a pantheistic conception of Christ.

The eyes of my soul were opened and saw the edge of the abyss,
Searched then steadfastly and minutely for a Saviour and found,
Wherever its glance fell, God everywhere.
Found Him in the songs of the poet,
Found Him in the word of the prophet,
Found Him in the myths of the North,
Found Him in the rolling of the ages,
Yet, then clearest and surest,
Found Him in the Book of books.²

Although he did not recover completely from his emotional collapse until about 1823, he was able to work and to write again by 1811. He now fused his abiding passion for history with his Bible Christianity, and he wrote a sort of universal Christian history called *Kort Begreb af Verdens Krønike i Sammenhaeng* (Brief Conceptions of World Chronicles), which was published in 1812 and which managed to infuriate the entire educated class of Copenhagen. The rationalist-oriented clergy in Copenhagen had in any case disliked Grundtvig from the day of his 1810 probationary sermon, 'Wherefore has the Word of the Lord vanished from His House?', and he wasn't able to obtain a first pastoral appointment until 1822. Even then, official objection to his unfashionable pietistic views compelled his resignation by 1826, and he was forced to subsist as best as he could on the tiny income from his writings and the generosity of his friends.

Denmark had in the meantime experienced a series of political and military disasters. Forced into war with England because of her alliance with Napoleon, Denmark lost her entire fleet in the 1807 bombardment of Copenhagen. In 1814, Denmark had to surrender Norway to Sweden. The economy was totally ruined; for years to come, Denmark was to be a provincial backwater, devoid of power and influence in

¹ A well-known play by Kaj Munk, *Egelykke*, deals with Grundtvig's love affair and his subsequent 'awakening'. It was produced in 1940.

² Grundtvig, *Vaerker i Udvalg ved Georg Christensen og Hal Koch*, I, 310. English translation of poem in Lindhardt, *op. cit.*, 20.

European affairs. Quite understandably, England was for a time regarded as the enemy; 'perfidious Albion', that 'nation of shopkeepers', was considered to be a haven for materialism, for all that was anti-theoretical to culture. Grundtvig shared these sentiments, but he nonetheless asked the King to send him to England so that he might be able to examine, in connection with some of the historical studies he was doing, various Anglo-Saxon manuscripts housed in the British Museum. The King agreed to supply financial support for the summer of 1829, and he renewed the grants for the summers of 1830 and 1831.

The visits to England sharpened considerably Grundtvig's sense of being Danish. He felt very much a foreigner in London. It would have been strange if this were not so. Denmark was an overwhelmingly rural kingdom, and Copenhagen was a sleepy provincial town. As E. J. Hobsbawm has noted of the period, 'The world of agriculture was sluggish . . . that of commerce, manufactures, and the technological and intellectual activities which went with both, was confident, brisk, and expansive . . .'¹ Grundtvig was certainly impressed immediately by the bustling atmosphere in English cities; on every side, he saw men energetically at work and machinery of incredible design. It never occurred to him for a moment to attribute England's bustling atmosphere to her industry and commerce; instead, he laid the cause of the industry and commerce to England's mighty spirit—to the belief that the native English spirit had freed itself from the dead hand of Rome which still dominated the continent. Grundtvig compared the steam-hammers he saw to the wonderful Thorshammer of Nordic mythology; he argued that the proof of England's magnificent fighting spirit lay in the fact that the English had even managed to place mathematics, the deadest and emptiest branch of knowledge, into 'the mighty stream of living activity', so that it acted as a lever for accomplishing tasks too heavy for the combined hands of the 'fighters'.² Grundtvig admitted that England was a tedious country in which to live in terms of the satisfactions of house and home and daily bread—the inns were unpleasant, the houses closed in like fortresses and a stranger was either left to himself, like an owl among crows, or else it was impressed upon him that for an Englishman to spend half an hour talking to a foreigner involved self-sacrifice. Nonetheless, Grundtvig could only admit that Denmark had somehow fallen behind England in a fundamental way, that Denmark had not yet evoked the proper fighting spirit and that the reason for this was that the English, by using their mother-tongue instead of a foreign language, had been able to unleash their unique spiritual essence.

In a lecture he gave on 16 November 1838 (part of the series called *Mands Minde*), Grundtvig declared that the public merit of England did not lie in its air, its port, its roast beef and potatoes or its machinery. It

¹ *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (N.Y., Mentor, 1962), 35.

² Grundtvig, *Vaerker i Udvalg*, IV, 332–3.

was the spirit of the people which mattered: 'the invisible life-force common in greater or lesser degree to all those who have a mother-tongue in common—a life-force whose element is free activity and whose breath is the mother-tongue.'¹ Furthermore, this spirit or life-force borne on the breath of the English mother-tongue was none other than 'the incomparable heroic spirit of the North, once widely known, now misjudged or forgotten'.² Grundtvig certainly did not consider English political institutions to be responsible for what he admired; he was never in any sense a liberal and never supposed that external institutions could alter the inner spirit. Many Danish writers have accepted Grundtvig's own assessment of his visits to England as marking a sharp turning point in his life and as giving him a new sense of 'reality'; however, Erica Simon maintains—and I agree with her—that the English journeys broadened the scope of Grundtvig's views but did not essentially change them.

Grundtvig's return from his final visit to England in 1831 coincided with new political developments in Denmark. The Paris July Revolution of 1830 had inspired some clamour in Denmark for greater popular participation in government. The King, still an absolute monarch, agreed that some purely advisory assemblies might be elected, and he further stipulated that a few of the assembly members might be peasants. Grundtvig now became politically active, arguing that the peasants must be taught Danish history so that they could properly understand and articulate the true spirit of the Danish folk. He proposed that a folk high school be established in Sorø to further the natural Danish spirit as opposed to the artificial spirit exemplified by the Latin schools and by the German spirit floating about the Danish upper classes. Grundtvig attracted large audiences to a series of lectures he gave in 1838 in Borchs Kollegium, Copenhagen, and he poured forth the ideas and dreams which had filled his mind since childhood—God, history, the Nordic myths and the Danish language—in a new spiritual combination which was to help spark a cultural renaissance for rural Denmark. The lectures centred mainly on modern history (history which had taken place in Grundtvig's lifetime).

Inspired by Grundtvig's speeches and publications, a movement called *Danske Samfund* (the Danish Association) was founded, and branches sprang up all over the country. National folksongs and rousing hymns, many of them composed by Grundtvig, were featured at association meetings. Despite some official opposition (such as that demonstrated by the Liberal Government in 1848 to what was termed 'exaggerated Danism' and a continued official refusal to found the suggested national folk high school), the Grundtvigian influence spread through rural Denmark and the demand for a 'people's' education grew steadily stronger. The new nationalist sentiments among Danish

¹ *Ibid.*, 335.

² *Ibid.*

peasants quite naturally caused practical difficulties in Slesvig, where the *embetsmenn* (civil servants of high rank who had university degrees and appointments from the King) were Germans educated at the University of Kiel. It was in Slesvig, not surprisingly, that the first folk high school, financed by private donations, was built in 1844 for the avowed aim of fostering Danish culture and the Danish language.

Nationalist feeling in Denmark was strengthened enormously by the 1848–50 war with Germany over Slesvig. More Grundtvig disciples sprang up; one of them, Christen Kold (1816–70), was to be an exceedingly important leader in the folk high school movement. The resounding 1864 defeat of Denmark by Prussia, which resulted in the loss of Slesvig and Holstein, inspired the founding of the famous folk high school at Askov, just across the border from Prussian-held Jutland. The Askov school was regarded as a spiritual fortification, providing support for and preservation of the folk spirit for those Danes now under Prussian rule.

Commencing with the reign of Queen Caroline Amalie in 1848, Grundtvig enjoyed considerable royal favour. The new Danish hymn-book issued by the State Church included many Grundtvig hymns, and he was granted the title of Bishop in 1861. When he died in 1872, his coffin was accompanied through the streets of Copenhagen by thousands of people singing the hymns he had written. The once-ridiculed pastor had become in the last thirty years of his life the symbol of Denmark's nineteenth-century national revival.¹

Grundtvig was not the kind of a thinker who presents reasoned arguments. He was first and foremost a moralist, who tirelessly exhorted his listeners to follow the chosen path. His turgid prose style inevitably evokes in the reader thoughts of Sunday sermons, and many of Grundtvig's essays were in fact delivered first as lectures. If driven to explain why he was advocating a certain course, he often fell back on the explanation of 'the Danish spirit' coursing through him. He was clearly a visionary, convinced that God had chosen the Danes for the task of returning ancient glories to the North. 'Yes, gentlemen,' he said in one of his 1838 lectures,

'the old Nordic picture-speech was alive in me before I knew it, and it is the artery of the bard, but it is also the fountain for my world-historical view and my research and, insofar as I have it, my historical wisdom.'²

His literary fame rests in large part, of course, on his poetry, and his hymns still form a major portion of those used in Danish church services. Grundtvig's output was absolutely prodigious; his collected prose works alone were published in a ten volume edition. Then there are nine volumes of poetry and five volumes of songs; in addition, a

¹ Grundtvig again became an important national symbol after the German invasion of Denmark on 9 April 1940. See William Michelsen, 'Grundtvig og Danskheden', *Nordisk tidsskrift för vitenskap, konst och industri* 21 (1945), 1–16.

² Grundtvig, *op. cit.*, IV, 336.

tremendous manuscript collection in the Royal Library at Copenhagen contains many items as yet neither edited nor printed. The total number of pages Grundtvig wrote has been estimated to be 30,000.

'King and Folk, Fatherland and mother-tongue'—these were the pillars of Grundtvig's nationalism, and he deplored in 1836 the Danish habit of allowing an interest in foreigners and foreign things to override what ought to be so basic. His theme was that King and folk form the natural Denmark, whereas the word 'state' can only be a designation for an artificial political device.

'The word "State" is, as we know, a foreign word, and signifies in itself just a kind of arrangement, which doesn't distinguish between authorities and those under them and the relationships between them, and can be used equally well for the Turkish sultan and the Mexican anarchy as for the kingdom of Denmark—and this language confusion is truly responsible for the equally lamentable and ridiculous conflict that now revolves around the state-constitution, as if the chief question weren't how power is used but in whose hands it rests, not which laws ought to be passed but who passed them; in short, not on how good or how bad the civil society will be, but on who can command them and decree what he wants in the name of the state.'¹

Grundtvig could not be satisfied with mere procedures; procedures, he maintained, were often used to mask the true spirit, the true reality. Ministers who no longer had any genuine feelings about religion could nonetheless go on administering the sacraments and reciting traditional formulae; parliaments (like that in revolutionary France) could proclaim their love for humanity while promulgating horrible, inhumane deeds. Grundtvig denied empty ritual, mechanical activity, rote learning. These were a form of death. He sought the spirit, the essence, the living, the natural. These were to be found in the community formed by those who spoke the same mother-tongue.

To be natural is to be alive; to be artificial is to be dead. This dichotomy lies at the base of Grundtvig's beliefs. Just as it is natural for a child to speak his mother tongue, so it is natural for a people to speak its native language. Grundtvig was serious when he warned the Danes that their souls would shrivel if they continued to speak German. He mocked them with an old proverb about French clothes looking ridiculous during a Danish winter. Through language and history, a cultural nation is fashioned. Literature is the mirror of a people's spirit, and history is not only the record of a people's growth but the manifestation of God's divine plan. For Danes to fulfil themselves, to express their essential spirit, they must use their own language and know their own history. The curriculum of the folk high schools—from their inception until the end of the nineteenth century—was to be anchored in the use of Danish (particularly in folk songs and myths) and in Grundtvig's view of history.

¹ *Haandbog i N.F.S. Grundtvigs Skrifter*, I, ed. by Ernst J. Borup and Frederik Schrøder (Copenhagen, 1929–31) 21.

Like Hamann and Herder, Grundtvig thought that language was the key to the understanding of God and of men; his conception of 'the living word', which he used in several ways, is basic to his ideas on religion, history and education. Man, Grundtvig held, is a being of spirit; it is his ability to speak which separates him from all other creatures. The living word carries the spirit from one man to another. God's historical plan, according to Grundtvig, centred around the birth of Jesus. Events before that time were a preparation; events after that time were to be seen in terms of the spread of the word of God in a living chain from Jesus to his disciples, and then to generation after generation of Christians. In the theological sense in which he used the term, Grundtvig's 'living word' was in the form of the Apostle's Creed; he thought that the handing down of the Creed provided a historical testimonial to the True Christianity. Genuine religion was contained in the living word; there was no need to bother with theological dogma, with the Latin nonsense put forth by the clergy.

Grundtvig thought that cultural nations, like individuals, passed through the various developmental stages of infancy, youth, maturity and old age. Childhood and youth were supposedly marked by imagination, maturity by feeling and old age by reflection. The time from Abraham to Moses, for example, formed the infancy stage for the Hebrews, while maturity ran from Moses to Solomon. Despite this use of biological analogy, however (which leads one to suppose that Grundtvig would have regarded all cultures as natural in some sense), Grundtvig insisted that certain nations were natural whereas others were artificial. He had in mind particularly the Romans and the Hebrews, whom he regarded as artificial, as opposed to the Greeks and the men of the North, who were natural. His notion of 'the North' was quite unique, for he included Danes, Swedes, Norwegians and Icelanders plus Goths, Langobards, the English and the Saxons—the last four groups on the grounds that they were descended from tribes which dwelled originally in Scandinavia. Except for the curious twist in connection with the North, Grundtvig's views are not dissimilar to those of many German Protestant writers of his period and a bit earlier. Rome was after all the symbolic seat of Catholicism, and good Lutherans tried to cut off all contact with the place. Greece, on the other hand, could be linked with paganism comfortably, and paganism was important because it connected with the *Ur*-spirit of the Germanic tribes. Furthermore, the language of Rome was associated with the oppressive ruling classes and with the repression of the vernacular, so that there were a multitude of reasons for hating Latin and (since a language expresses the spirit of a people) the Romans. Latin was a universal, cosmopolitan, rounded-off vehicle associated with the clergy and with bureaucrats; such a language could not express the homely, crude, particular, 'natural' aspects of life. It was a fantastic relief for a man to be able to write freely in the language of his childhood, to be able to express for a

literate public what had previously been inexpressible. 'Latin's ruling time has been poetry's hell,' Grundtvig announced.¹

Herder had expounded on nations in terms of biological analogy, and Grundtvig followed him. The natural community, according to Herder, grows spontaneously like a plant; it is not pinned together artificially by law or by force. Each nation has a unique spirit. From *Vater Jahn*, Grundtvig borrowed the word *Volkstümlichkeit* (a word first used by Jahn in 1810 in his book *Deutsches Volkstum*), which referred to this unique spirit, and he translated it into the Danish *Folkelighed*. A fourteen stanza poem by Grundtvig entitled '*Folkeligheden*'² (1848) contains

Folk! hvad er vel Folk igrunden?
 Hvad betyder 'folkeligt'?
 Er det Naesen eller Munden,
 Hvorpaa man opdager slikt?

Byrd og Blod er Folke-Grunde, Ikke Luft og mindre Staal,
 Faelles Ord i Folke-Munde, Det er Folkets Modersmaal,
 Som det klinger, som det gløder, Saa hos Danskere og Jøder
 Holder det i skjulte Baand, Luftens eller Himlens Aand . . .

Faaer vi aegte Danske Love, Danske Skoler splinternye,
 Danske Tanker, Danske Plove, Rinder op vort gamle Ry:
 'Dansken, lykkelig begavet, Boer med Fred og Fryd paa Havet;'
 Da er Folkets Daad og Digt, Da er alting folkeligt.

many revealing lines:

Folk! What is 'the folk' at bottom?
 What does 'folkeligt' denote?
 Is the nose or is the mouth
 The means by which one fathoms it?

Birth and blood are the people's basis,
 Not the air and less the steel,
 The common word in the people's mouth,
 That is the people's mother-tongue.
 That which rings, that which glows,
 Among the Danes as among the Jews,
 Holds within in hidden bond,
 The spirit of the heavens.

If we're to have real Danish law,
 Danish schooling freshly new,
 Danish thinking, Danish plowing,
 Our oldtime fame we must renew.
 'Danes, so fortunately gifted,
 Live with peace and joy at sea;'
 That is the people's song and deed,
 That is all which is 'folkeligt'.

¹ Grundtvig, *op. cit.*, IV. 323.

² *Folkeligheden* appeared originally in the journal *Danskeren*. Eight stanzas are reprinted in *Haandbog i N.F.S. Grundtvigs Skrifter*, 191-2. For the lines I have translated, this is the original Danish:

Like Herder, Grundtvig was deeply moved by the sense of belonging to a group or community; he didn't think it possible to be fully human, to live a creative life except in terms of the speech and the tradition into which one was born. If one imitated models from other cultures instead of relying on the inner spirit, the result would be empty formula, meaningless ritual, cultural decay and death.

Cultures foreign to one's own, Grundtvig thought, could be understood only by a kind of intuition or empathy; one must be able to get 'inside' a culture. The best way to do this is through language and literature. Grundtvig followed Herder and other German romantics in admiring extravagantly Shakespeare's plays as the lusty expression of the unique English spirit (a spirit supposedly much closer to the German or Danish spirit than to that of the French). He tutored his own children in Greek, for he thought that some students ought to know Greek and Icelandic so that they might understand something of the Greek spirit and of the Northern spirit at the height of their glory. At the same time, a German or Dane, no matter how much he studied Greek, must never imagine that he really *was* Greek—that, for example, he could write plays in the form of Greek tragedy. Language is powerful, but the mother-tongue is all-powerful.

Like Herder, too, Grundtvig held in theory that the spirit of one nation was as valid as the spirit of another—each nation created by God, each like a single instrument in a vast symphony orchestra or a single flower in a wonderful, varied, colourful garden. In one of the lectures in *Mands Minde*, Grundtvig presented an exceedingly sympathetic account of the work of *Vater* Jahn in reviving the cultural nationalist spirit of Germany. (In current histories, of course, Jahn is usually treated as a rather revolting precursor to Nazism.) One can sense Grundtvig fairly trembling with rage as he tells the story of the official repression of the German student societies after the Jahn-led nationalist jubilee at Wartburg Castle on 18 October 1817. Grundtvig regarded the burning of books by the students as an innocent gesture to commemorate Luther's burning of the papal bull. In better times, he avers, the whole thing would have been treated as a student prank; in those dark days in Germany, however, the rulers were turning trivial events into major matters of state.¹ Grundtvig commented in the introduction to his lecture on Jahn that he had nothing against the German spirit *per se*, that he even admired it in many respects, but of course he didn't like the fact that the Germans always seemed to want to push their particular spirit on to him and other Danes.

Both Grundtvig and Herder claimed that each national spirit had a unique worth, and Grundtvig's assessment of Jahn was certainly sympathetic, but often their passionate patriotism did lead them into passing adverse judgements on certain cultures, especially the Roman and

¹ Grundtvig, *op. cit.*, IV. 319–20.

the Hebrew. Similarly, it comes as no great surprise to find that Grundtvig placed the men of the North in an exalted historical position. First off, he felt, the Goths were to be commended for having successfully turned back Roman military power in the West. Then the English, by developing the literary use of their mother tongue at an early stage, helped to break the hegemony of Latin which had persisted even after the breakup of the Roman Empire. Grundtvig was rather torn when he came to consider the Normans, for on the one hand they were of Scandinavian descent, but on the other they gave up their native speech for French, a Romance language. Still, he consoled himself, they did write in their native dialect of French, thus resisting Rome to a certain degree. Both the English and the Normans are overshadowed for Grundtvig, however, by the magnificent Icelanders, whose civilization came to full flower in the medieval period. He saw the Crusades as the supreme culmination of the Middle Ages, as a great battle for a Christian cause led by the magnificent men of the North. Like all the German romantics, he rejected the 'Dark Ages' conception of the medieval era. In fact, he thought the Renaissance and neo-classicism hateful because he regarded them as attempts to bring back Roman culture. The Reformation, fortunately, broke the power of the Roman Church, and Grundtvig was confident that a new day was once again about to dawn, that a revival of the fighting Northern spirit was about to commence. Thus, when Grundtvig called to his fellow Danes to awaken, he was urging that they take their rightful place in history and serve the cause of God. Although every nation supposedly possessed a spirit equally valid in God's domain, the Danes were after all for Grundtvig a chosen people. In his eyes, the Danish cause was not merely for the Danes alone, but for all the North, for humanity, for Christianity, for Providence, for God Almighty.

Grundtvig's heavy intellectual debts to German philosophers, and especially to Herder, are quite obvious. He placed a different twist on their ideas because of his Danish patriotism, and he was more of an old-fashioned pietistic Lutheran than most of the German romantics, but he adopted the basic anti-Enlightenment position and was wildly excited by the new views of language and history. In commenting on Henrik Steffens' impact on the intellectual circles of Copenhagen, Grundtvig said:

'... He stood in a new relationship with the philosopher Schelling, the poets Tieck and Novalis and the Schlegel brothers; in short, with all the leaders of the so-called new school in Germany, who were educated in the last years of the eighteenth century, and were here almost unknown except through rumor; they were like a mad contradiction to the whole of eighteenth century poetry, history, physics, philosophy, theology, art and science... A German revolution in the learned world much more cruel than the French revolution in bourgeois society, and which into the bargain was in direct opposition to the French revolution, depicted by the new school as a vulgar tragi-comedy, carried on by inmates of the mad-

house which had been built by Voltaire and his ilk and termed Wisdom's Temple . . .'¹

The questionable history of the North which Grundtvig concocted seems quite comic viewed through modern eyes, but it was not unlike the histories being written by other Scandinavians smitten with romantic fever. Oskar Falnes, in his interesting *National Romanticism in Norway*, has outlined the views of some of the Norwegian historians of the 1850s, and these are similar to Grundtvig's. The special spirit of a people was held to be impaired if there was too much contact with foreign influences and foreign languages. In the case of the Norwegians, the feared foreign influence was Danish rather than German; hence, the Norwegian historians spent their time attempting to construct theories of history which would deposit the true spirit of the North with them rather than with the Danes. They, too, were enthusiastic about philological investigation.

"They felt it to be the "pride of their century," the "thread of Ariadne" which led them through the labyrinths of tribal relationships and migrations, and disclosed what they were most anxious to know about early national affinities. They expected comparative philology to prove as important for historical research as the perfecting of the steam engine had been in the industrial field."²

Since the peasants were the most isolated from foreign corruption, they were held by the romantic historians to be the repository of the genuine national spirit. They were thought to belong to the earlier world of fancy and folklore, when the national spirit was young. Unfortunately, just as the romantics discovered these pure souls, the peasants were uncooperatively beginning to respond to modern conditions and desert their assigned role as guardians of the tradition. To reverse this trend, the romantic historians thought, one must ignite in the peasant a respect for his customary or traditional way of life. Grundtvig's scheme for the folk high school was a typically romantic response to a situation regarded as potentially catastrophic. One should note, by the way, that there was no necessary connection between this type of concern for the peasant and any moves toward political democracy. Grundtvig was a monarchist, and he saw no reason for democracy if the king was already governing in the true national interest. He argued, in fact, that if the inner spirit of a people was respected by their king, then the subjects were actually experiencing *self-government*—a theoretical position quite popular in Germany. As it happened, however, the Grundtvig-inspired folk high schools became training centres for the leaders of the rural-based Danish *Venstre* (Left) Party.

Grundtvig's preoccupation with the kindling of the Danish national spirit inevitably entailed a vital interest in education. He was never

¹ Grundtvig, *op. cit.*, IV. 297.

² Oskar Falnes, *National Romanticism in Norway* (N.Y., Columbia U. Press, 1933), 190.

particularly concerned with child pedagogy as such, however. Children were best off at home with their mothers, he believed, for their primary education was not to be found in books but in practical life. He didn't totally reject the common school (although he was opposed to compulsory schools), but he thought its function should be limited strictly to the teaching of reading, writing and arithmetic. Certainly there should be no religious training in school, for it could only result in a spiritless kind of affair. Since childhood was the time of imagination, children could be expected to respond sympathetically to the myths and stories connected with the period when the culture was in its early imaginative stage. They should be taught in a lively way, Grundtvig said, and he suggested that many of the lessons could be offered in the form of songs.

The idea of a non-Latin type of high school occurred to Grundtvig as early as 1807, but his thoughts on the subject were initially very vague. He talked of a folk-historical education several times between 1815 and 1818 in his journal *Dannevirke*, and he continued to play with the idea through the 1820s. It was only after his return from England, however, that he began to articulate his hopes in a more precise manner. He suggested, in connection with his argument that the peasants must know their country's history in order to give intelligent advice when serving on the Advisory Assemblies, that Sorø Academy, once a school for the children of noblemen and now no longer used, be converted to a folk high school.

'... if *Folkelighed* is to thrive in our time, if the folk spirit is to prevail, if the advisory assembly is to be in a position to give radical advice, there must be founded as quickly as possible, better today than tomorrow, a folk or patriotic high school or (the name has little or nothing to do with the matter) educational institution, open to all the young of the populace, in which the mother tongue will have absolute power, and in which the uncomplicated but magnificent task is to enlighten the people as to their own natural temperament and their fatherland...'¹

Three essays published between 1836 and 1838 contain attempts to outline the kind of school which could inspire the love of fatherland and the blossoming of the mother-tongue. It was to be open to all adults who wished to attend (Grundtvig believed that eighteen years was the minimum receptive age for being able to grasp the spiritual significance of life; at eighteen, one entered the 'age of feeling'). There would be no examinations of any sort, and the students could choose from the courses offered those they thought might benefit them as citizens. The teaching style was to be as far removed as possible from academic lectures; songs and so-called 'free talks' would be the main vehicle, with a 'poetic-historical' approach permeating all subjects. Grundtvig criticized harshly the existent schools, with their emphasis on rote-learning and bookishness. These were schools for death. The folk high school

¹ Grundtvig, *op. cit.*, IV. 253.

would be a school for life, its main concern the spiritual development of the students.

For a time, King Christian VIII was exceedingly interested in Grundtvig's plan for Sorø; he issued a decree in 1847 on founding the school but died before the decree was implemented. Grundtvig was unable to get the matter taken up again; the Minister for Church and Education referred acidly to the folk high school project as 'a kind of educational institution monopolized by Danishness'.¹ In addition to the Sorø plan, Grundtvig worked on the notion of a Nordic high school to be located in Sweden. It was to be both a folk high school and a training institution for civil servants of all the countries of the North. He painted glowing pictures, based heavily on impressions of college life which he had observed during brief visits to Oxford and Cambridge, of the delightful fellowship which would develop among all those interested in participating in a Northern cultural life and in furthering Northern art and science. Such a Nordic high school was never founded, however.

Grundtvig's disciples, most of whom were theological students, carried forward the folk high school idea; between 1848 and 1900, they established an enormous number of schools. These schools varied somewhat in instructional style, but a pietistic atmosphere was common to all. Great emphasis was placed on keeping the schools homelike; the students were considered to belong to one large family. The wives of the teachers played a very important role, for their ability to maintain a warm and friendly house atmosphere greatly affected the spiritual fellowship. Reminiscences of life in folk high schools refer constantly to the very special kind of warmth experienced, and the accounts are strikingly similar to the Lutheran parsonage literature described by Minder.² The simple life, the inner light, spiritual harmony, being at one with nature—all these are stressed again and again. Bible stories, hymns, national folk songs and Grundtvig's historical theories formed the foundation for awakening the students to the importance of the Danish cultural heritage. Grundtvig's *Handbook of Universal History* was a favourite text.

Over the years, the folk high schools shifted considerably from the 'poetic-historical' view of life associated with Grundtvig. The natural sciences made inroads into the curriculum; books and writing cut into the province of the living word. Singing remained important, and so did the idea of history as a kind of unbroken chain.

'... it is perceived that generation follows generation and unites all in a great human fellowship, in which those who have gone before are absorbed in a mighty spirit, which recreates its forms through time.'³

¹ Remark of Madvig's quoted in *Haandbog i N.F.S. Grundtvigs Skrifter*, Vol. 1, p. viii.

² Another series which corresponds to the literature Minder describes is the multi-volume *Minder fra gamle Grundtvig'ske hjem* (Memories of Old Grundtvig Homes), ed. by H. P. B. Barfod.

³ Begtrup, *op. cit.*, 142.

Furthermore, the idea persisted that the school must be a home and not an impersonal institution; the teachers and students must form a family group. Most important, certain notions of romantic nationalism appeared to be built into the very conception of a folk high school. Consider this statement, for example, by Holger Begtrup, formerly of the Fredericksborg High School:

‘The folk high-schools of Denmark are not the product of a scientific doctrine of education, and have nothing to do with any carefully devised educational system. Let that first be clearly understood. They came into being as a young tree grows out of the Danish soil . . . The idea which gave them birth was not conceived in the mind of a college professor; it was conceived in that of a prophet, a spiritual genius who understood the life and mind of his people throughout the ages . . .’¹

In 1934, Koppel S. Pinson published a study of *Pietism as a Factor in the Rise of German Nationalism*.² His thesis was that ‘certain intellectual, psychological, and emotional reactions engendered and developed within the religious sphere of Pietism, came in the course of time to be transferred to the realm of nationalism and nationality’.³ The cultural nationalists, Pinson argued, were in fact ‘enlightened Pietists’, men who shared the emotional attitudes of the Pietists but who could no longer find sufficient support solely in the doctrines of Christianity.⁴ He thought that there was a clear parallel between the pietistic experience of *Wiedergeburt* (regeneration, such as that experienced by Grundtvig after his emotional collapse in 1810) and the notion of national revival. The importance of *Gemeinschaft* in the religious sphere was likewise a pietistic development, according to Pinson, and his book included a detailed discussion of the work of Count Zinzendorf, who had an embryo theory of national religion. Many other aspects of Pietism were also thought by Pinson to have a bearing on cultural nationalism: the emphasis on Jesus as a human and historical figure, the belief that the training of the heart is more important than the training of the intellect, the view that language is the expression of the inner spirit, and the strong emphasis on the importance of the vernacular. It can quite legitimately be argued, I think, that Grundtvig and his folk high school movement are an illustration of pietism as a factor in the rise of Danish nationalism. And it is just that curious combination of pietism-romanticism-nationalism which has made the folk high schools so unique.

¹ Begtrup, *op. cit.*, 79.

² N.Y., Columbia U. Press, 1934.

³ Pinson, *Pietism as a Factor in the Rise of German Nationalism*, 25.

⁴ Kaj Thaning, in his *Menneske Først—Grundtvigs opgør med sig selv* (Copenhagen, Gyldendal, 1963), sees the central theme of Grundtvig’s intellectual life as the development from the ‘*bodskristendom*’ (repentance-Christianity) of his childhood upbringing to a human or historical Christianity. Grundtvig reached his enlightened Christianity, however, via the path of the *Volksgeist*, the path of romantic nationalism.

Grundtvig constructed a national ideology and then roughed out a scheme for the kind of school in which that ideology could be transmitted. He was vitally concerned with the continuity of the Danish national tradition. It was imperative that the young be inspired with a feeling for the national community; otherwise, the heroic spirit of the North would remain forever dormant in Denmark. Grundtvig belongs historically with such nineteenth-century nationalist revival figures as *Vater Jahn*, Schleiermacher and Hardenberg.¹ It is a serious misconception to suppose that the folk high schools, because they had no examinations and were based on voluntary attendance, were early versions of Summerhill. God, fatherland and mother-tongue—these were the essentials of Grundtvig's school. The notion of *Folkelighed*, 'Volkishness', *Volkstümlichkeit* was absolutely essential to the nature of Grundtvig's mission. Yet despite the emphasis on blood and folk, on language and myth, on natural bonds, and on many of the other elements associated with the anti-Enlightenment German heritage, the Grundtvig movement in Denmark was never connected with racism or anti-Semitism. Furthermore, the schools were allied with the *Venstre* (Left) Party of Denmark; Grundtvig himself, though a monarchist, always championed free speech, free press and free religion. In Germany, 'Volkish' thought was harnessed eventually to fascism; in Denmark, 'Volkish' thought was linked with populism. Grundtvig was obsessed with the idea of *Gemeinschaft*, but always in conjunction with liberty and equality, peace and freedom.

¹ Interestingly, Erica Simon, in trying to make a case for Grundtvig's 'universality', argues that Grundtvig's modern parallel is Senghor of Senegal, and that the parallel to Grundtvig's *Folkelighed* is Senghor's concept of 'negritude'. 'Grundtvigs universalitet,' *Dansk Udsyn* 46 (1966), 181-6.

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