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NATURE AS A SIGN

Grundtvig and science



One of the best-loved songs in the Folk High School songbook is Grundtvig's *I wandered out one summer's day*, from 1847, the first stanza of which goes like this:

*I wandered out one summer's day to hear
The songs of birds so moving to the heart,
In the deepest dales
Amongst nightingales
And the other little talking birds.*

What the singer encounters in this song is a nature poem. Or is it? If we read on, the song contains surprisingly little that could be regarded as descriptions of landscape, flowers, animal life and things of that kind. It does, admittedly, refer to "the valleys deep", "the green halls" and "the beech grove", but there is something else going on. The little bird is bringing a message:

*It sang so sweetly of the lovely moors and meadows
Where forget-me-nots grow wild like grass in fields.*

This sounds like and indeed is a description of landscape, but it is more than this. The phrase "lovely moors and meadows" is one of Grundtvig's favourite expressions and a reference to the first line of Laurids Kok's song *Denmark's lovely Moors and Meadows*, a song about the building of the Dannevirke, a defensive earthwork from the 8th century, allegedly erected by queen Thyra Danebod. Much earlier, Grundtvig had revised the poem himself in the periodical *Danne-Virke* (1816-19) and the first line of Kok's poem became part of his permanent stock of fixed expressions after that. So when the words appear in *I wandered out one summer's day*, while describing the beautiful Danish countryside, they are just as much alluding to the unity of the nation and the people. They have an echo chamber way back in history, so that there are reverberations from Laurids Kok's collection of songs, from folk ballads generally and, going even further back, from Thyra Danebod's great work, when the little bird sings in the beech grove.

This echo chamber also crops up in connection with the forget-me-nots. From relatively early on in his life, Grundtvig was obsessed with this little blue flower whose name signified loving remembrance; to his historical mind, it stood for the harmonious relationship between the present and the past. By lovingly recalling the past, its heroic deeds could be revived in the present.

In the song of the bird, the whole interconnection between the popular and the historical for which Grundtvig strove so passionately, was given expression, and that is what lies behind the request to the bird:

Concert

i Roskilde Domkirke
Søndag den 18 Juli om Eftermiddagen Kl. 5

Med hoi Vedkommendes Tilladelse giver den skandinaviske Sangforening, med velvillig Understøttelse af Hr. Organist Hansen samt nogle af det kongelige Theaterspersonale, en Concert i Roskilde Domkirke af følgende Indhold:

1. Orgelfantasi over "Danmark deiligst Vang og Vange" composeret og udføres af Hr. Organist Hansen.
2. Mottet af Vittoria Chor.
3. Quartet af Weyse
4. Sjælesang. Chor
5. Quartet af Crusell
6. Solo. Quartet og Chor af Hr. Organist Hansens Paaskecantate 1813

1. Hymn af Crusell. Chor
2. Quartet af Weyse.
3. Orgelfantasi, udføres af Hr. Organist Hansen.
4. Mottet af Palestrina
5. Gustav Adolphs Krigspsalme Chor
6. Slaget ved Slesvig. Chor
7. Krigspsalme af H. Rung. Chor

Billetter à 3 Mk. erholdes i Roskilde hos Hr. Kammerraad Hansen og i Kjøbenhavn hos Dhr. Musikhandlere Commerceraad Olsen og Løse & Dehnbø, samt ved Indgangen, som sælges Kl. 4½

Indtægten tilfalder de trængende danske Slesvigere.

Support Concert in Roskilde Cathedral. Summer 1848. During the three-year war there was talk of the necessity of protection against the South. The song "Fairrest Denmark, moor and meadow" became a national rallying point. Here it is the last item in the concert.

Opposite page:

Christian Frederik Christensen: Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, 1830. Grundtvig was an original personality. He was said to be able to make others feel inferior in his company. The folded arms help highlight Grundtvig's intransigent side. He was also intransigent towards science.



*Oh, fly from Sound to Dannevirke,
And sing for dances, schools and churches.*

And whoever hears this song will be filled with love for the motherland:

*For all will feel, who have a precious mother
That it is good to be in Dannevang (Denmark)*

SYMBOLIC NATURE

To Grundvig nature is primarily symbolic. It is in nature that a higher spiritual, national, Christian and historical reality finds expression, and nature acquires its character through being a part or a symbol of this higher reality.

There is nothing very unusual about this view of nature. It was widely held in the centuries before Grundtvig, was conspicuously present in a number of Grundtvig's contemporaries and was also, in various ways, alive and well long after the age of Grundtvig. It is very common in literature and art, where nature seems to react to or to provide interpretations of deeds, events and circumstances in the human world. It is even possible to detect the occasional use of nature in this way in the work of some naturalists, such as Pontoppidan.

Christian Købke: Part of the bay at the lime kiln seen from Strandpromenaden facing North. Quiet afternoon in summer, 1837. Grundtvig grew up in Udby, where his father was the pastor. He spent his adult life in Copenhagen, however. The countryside north of the city was the closest he could get to the historical idyll.



Peter Christian Skovgaard: View of Skarritsø, 1844. Grundtvig's personality attracted many of the painters of the age, including P.C. Skovgaard, J.T. Lundbye and C. Købke. He was probably not interested in their landscape paintings, however, in spite of the fact that their pictures depict Denmark as the gentle, beautiful country that one imagines Grundtvig saw. But painting and sculpture were ranked as the lowest, most material, forms of art, whereas the art of words, poetry, was ranked as the highest art.

Thus, in one sense, Grundtvig was not unusual. The interesting thing is how systematic he is in his interpretations of nature and the doggedness with which he adheres to his views. Through the poems he constructs a world of symbols that consists of a number of fixed elements and patterns of interpretation. The little songbird in the beech grove, for example, can be found in countless places, in a number of different variants of Grundtvig's poems, but the national and historical connection is invariably there. Grundtvig regarded this symbolic world linked to nature as an integral part of his world picture and therefore as inalienable, in a radically different way to most of his contemporaries in whose works this kind of nature symbolism should be interpreted metaphorically or is simply used because it is decorative.

GRUNDTVIG AND SCIENCE

Grundtvig was not particularly interested in the sciences although he was not hostile to them in principle. While appreciating that they represented progress and enthusing about the power of the steam engines in England, his own intellectual interests lay within the humanities and theology and nearly all his thoughts on science are directed towards these areas. Here, his creativity and his views on popular culture and theology could find relatively free expression, and his extraordinary ability to create syntheses could integrate a number of very different elements into one great vision,



the vision that is also expressed in his interpretation of nature. Unlike many of the Romantics, he made no systematic attempt to include scientific thoughts in his writings. He did not consider the knowledge they contributed to be particularly important. Thus, when outlining his ideas on teaching in *On the Conversion of Sorø Academy into a Folk High School*, he includes a language teacher, a teacher in Danish history, a teacher with knowledge of “folk ballads” and a lawyer in his envisaged essential core of teachers. The only provision for science is the inclusion of a geography teacher with specialist knowledge of Danish towns, rivers, industry and customs, for as he states most emphatically, “People are what really matter”. This is not necessarily evidence of opposition to science, since it is not the purpose of a Folk High School to train scientists, but it shows that Grundtvig does not regard the sciences as a necessary part of a broad curriculum for the general population.

There were also occasions when the inventions of modern science managed to annoy him. Perhaps the most exasperated statement on the natural sciences by Grundtvig in his riper years can be found in an article he wrote in 1837. It appears in *Nordisk Kirke-Tidende* and is called ‘Den Copernikanske Astronomi som den

Johan Thomas Lundbye: A prehistoric grave mound at Raklev on Refnæs, 1839. Both Grundtvig and Lundbye delighted in the Danish countryside in general and in observing tiny plants and details. What mattered to both of them was the personal experience rather than scientific research. The prehistoric grave mound is especially monumental in this light-filled landscape painting, thereby throwing the history into relief. Grundtvig believed that people ought to use history in order to acquire self-knowledge.

Jørgen Sonne: Rural scene, 1848. First man, then a Christian, said Grundtvig. The human aspect always exists as something national for Grundtvig. And one is always a man in the context of a particular people with its own history. The national character unites everyone. He had sensed this kind of national character on his travels in England and Grundtvig subsequently wanted the Nordic spirit to be reborn in Denmark. In his popular, national motif, Sonne employs the dolmen and red and white colours to denote the national bonds linking the Danish people.



ferde Troes-Artikel' (Copernican Astronomy as the Fourth Article of Faith). In it, he attacks the idea that the earth moves around the sun rather than the reverse. There were two reasons for this. On the one hand, he maintains that, theologically speaking, it matters whether or not the astronomers are right because their findings rock the truth of the Bible and Christians cannot be expected to yield to Copernican astronomy, since the scientists would then be acting like popes on a matter of faith. On the other hand, and linked to this, he maintains that the requirement to bow to the inventions of science is tyrannical, since human beings, solely on the basis of the proclaimed expertise of other people, are thereby expected to make a judgement that directly contradicts the evidence of their own eyes, which shows them that the sun moves around the earth.

The article reveals several things about Grundtvig's attitude to science. Despite his relative goodwill towards it, he regards the recent scientific results as a challenge to or even a threat to his own interpretation of the world. In his view of nature,



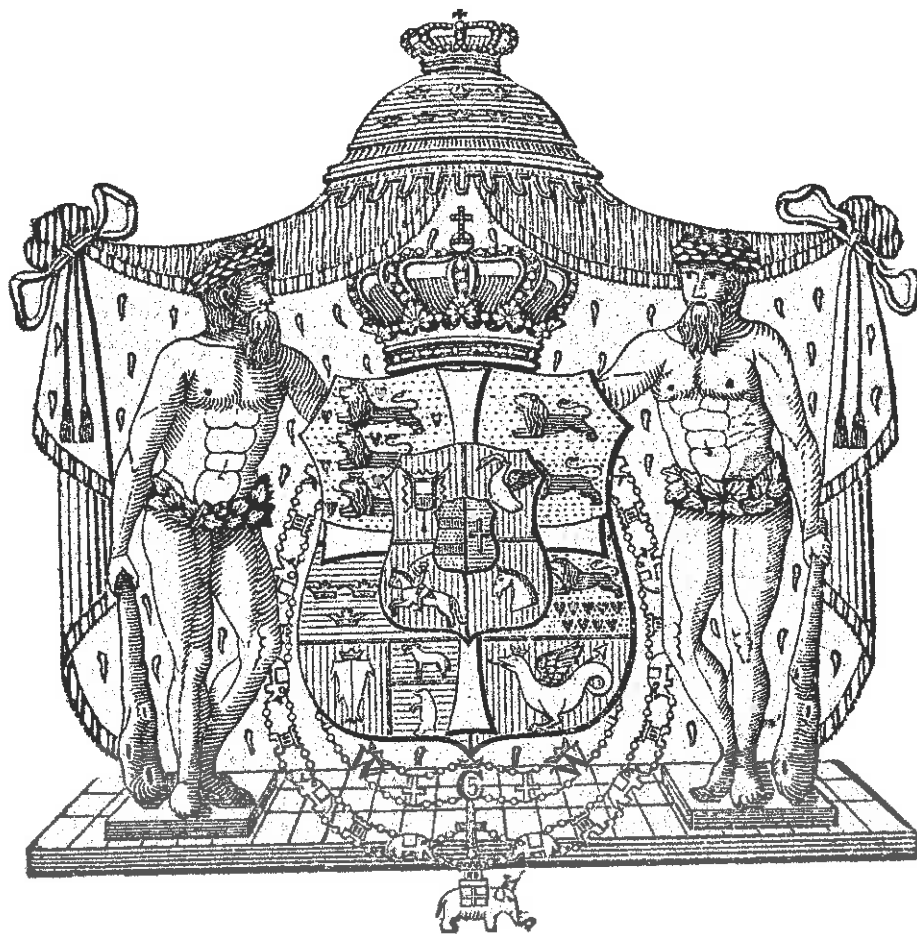
Bertel Thorvaldsen: The astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus, 1822. Grundtvig became fond of Thorvaldsen. But he made it clear to everybody that he had never admired any of his work. God was the only competent sculptor. Grundtvig abandoned any kind of authoritarian intermediary between the individual human being and God. Copernicus and other scientists ought to stop acting like popes towards ordinary people.

Grundtvig is a late practitioner of an interpretation tradition that goes back several thousand years, one as old as, or older than, Christianity itself. Like science, it regards nature as theoretically comprehensible, but it is a completely different theological, humanistic or artistic interpretation that is being applied. When there is conflict between this interpretation and the new scientific findings, Grundtvig reacts in a completely different way to what had become the norm. Instead of allowing the new discoveries to refute what was previously believed to be true, Grundtvig holds on to his interpretation and instead accuses scientists of wanting to act like popes in matters of faith for ordinary people. In doing so, he shows a complete lack of understanding of what was fundamentally new about the scientific situation that arose with this breakthrough in science. But at the same time, he reveals, more or less intentionally, that the opposition between science and theology is in reality a false one and that they are two different modes of interpretation that can only to a very limited extent dictate to each other. In this way, he is at the same time clearly lagging behind the science of his age, but ahead of his time in his ability to interpret the findings of science.



Constantin Hansen: Grundtvig on his Pegasus, Sleipner, who is kicking out at "Latin" and "German", 1846. This is one of a series of satirical drawings aimed primarily at writers of the period. They were published as a joke in a close circle of friends. Grundtvig's Pegasus is the Nordic Sleipner, Odin's eight-legged horse.

One of the central elements of Grundtvig's fight for ordinary people and for his theology is his revolt against what he calls exegetic popery. He believes that when the specialist theologians assert that their new theological departures should become the norm for church teaching, they are turning themselves into a kind of popes, since they are demanding the right to dictate at will what others should believe, without allowing the others to protest. We can see a parallel way of thinking in his writings on popular culture, when he maintains that although not everyone is capable of becoming a scholar, this does not mean that the learned should be exempt from the criticism of ordinary people. This is the argumentation that he expands in the article about the Copernican revolution to include the observations of astronomers. But this shows its limitations. The science that has arisen has gradually come to require so much prior knowledge that there will inevitably be a comprehensibility gap between the researchers and the public as well as huge comprehensibility gaps within the various sciences. It will become increasingly the case, therefore, that the majority will not have any chance of understanding how science has arrived at its conclusions and will only be capable of partly understanding what the results actually are. One



The Danish national coat-of-arms, 1836. To Grundtvig the lion was always descended from Judas (cf. Revelation 5.5). It was thus a symbol of the Danes' heartfelt relationship to Christianity that the heart in the coat-of-arms was with the lion, and against an azure background at that.

can like it or lump it but this is the reality. Grundtvig also failed to understand the new relative degree of certainty that characterises scientific findings. Although there is much that we do not know and much that is open to discussion, there are also some things that cannot really be disputed. That the earth moves round the sun and not vice versa is one of these things.

Grundtvig belonged to a tradition that had interpretation at its heart, and his entire symbolic interpretation of nature was shaped in this tradition. In a way, this is a scientific scandal. Almost a hundred years before Grundtvig's article about Copernican astronomy, the Scottish philosopher David Hume wrote ironically about the state of the humanities. In the preface to his most important work, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), he comments that "There is nothing which is not the subject of debate, and in which men of learning are not of contrary opinion. The most trivial question escapes not our controversy, and in the most momentous we are not able to give any certain decision." Grundtvig belongs in this tradition of interpretation, albeit positioned not at Hume's ironic distance but in the middle of the struggle to arrive at the right interpretation of human and divine phenomena. He is therefore accustomed always to being able to argue about everything with everybody. He does not understand that the situation has changed in relation to the new science.

Or does he? Although it occurs hesitantly and reluctantly, there are a number

of contemporary scientific acknowledgements in his writings. His description of the creation in *Haandbog i Verdens-Historien* (A Reference Book Of World History, 1833) shows that he was well aware of the fact that the earth was probably created rather differently from the way described in Genesis. To quote an extended passage from his account of this:

“Whether anything other than the divinely inspired human being’s fundamental view of the Creation and the Creator should be understood by that is doubtful, but this idea of the creation of the world is certainly divine, for unlike any other it is both worthy of God and suited to the highest flights of the human spirit and the deepest feelings of the heart, and not even sophistry has been able to discover a single part of it that conflicts with eternal truth; even if it should prove the case that some mountains were much older than the race that sprang from Adam, many of the books by our learned scholars would no longer be valid, but not one jot or tittle of the Book of Creation would be affected.” (*Udvalgte Skrifter* 6, 45).

Grundtvig does all he possibly can to cling to the Biblical myth of the Creation, but he has carefully opened up all the ways out that he needs to. Partly he allows it to remain open, as a local admission, whether or not geological evidence of the great age of the mountains is right, and partly he has the complete explanation ready, should “one jot or tittle” of the Creation myth actually be successfully challenged. Even if the Creation myth does not reveal the origins of the earth, it gives an accurate emotional and spiritual account of the relationship between creator and creation. A modern theological account of the Creation myth has thereby been formulated that cannot be influenced by anything that science might come up with.

Grundtvig’s skills of interpretation thus reveal themselves to be much more flexible when confronted by science than one would expect from a reading of such a bombastic text as ‘Den Copernikanske Astronomi som den fjerde Troes-Artikel’. A passage like the one from *Haandbog i Verdens-Historien* could well serve as an icon for Grundtvig’s attitude towards science. He knows very little about it and only slowly and reluctantly bows to its results, but he appears to find it remarkably easy to deal with them. When the potential theological, artistic and humanistic significance of these results has to be assessed, one finds oneself in precisely the changing, ambiguous, inspiring field of research in which Grundtvig always moves. In this field science can be subjected to all kinds of peculiar, symbolic interpretations against which no observation or account, however objective, can protect it. It can tell us all kinds of things about beech groves or deep valleys that Grundtvig does not have the slightest idea of, but it cannot tell anyone what the little bird is singing about.