

The Ragnarøk Within: Grundtvig, Jung, and the Subjective Interpretation of Myth

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It is hard to overestimate the influence of N. F. S. Grundtvig on Danish culture. Indeed, in many ways he can be called the inventor (or at least the re-inventor) of Danish culture. He published more than any Danish author before or since, and his name is as familiar in Denmark as that of Shakespeare in the English-speaking world. His writings on church and on education still form the core of theological and pedagogical studies at Danish universities, and any school-aged child in Denmark can recite several Grundtvig hymns or songs from memory. Kierkegaard scholars from other countries are often surprised to come to Denmark and find that his contemporary Grundtvig figures far more prominently.

Grundtvig's major writings on myth (*Lidet om sangene i Edda*,¹ *Om Asalæren*,² *Nordens Mytologi 1808*,³ *Nordens Mythologi 1832*,⁴ and *Græsk og*

¹ *Ny Minerva* (Sept. 1806), rpt. *Nik. Fred. Sev. Grundtvigs Udvalgte Skrifter [US]*, 10 vols., ed. Holger Begtrup (København: Gyldendal, 1904-1909) 5: 116-134.

² *Ny Minerva* (May 1807), rpt. *US* 1: 203-223.

*Nordisk Mythologi for Ungdommen*⁵) form a significant part of his authorship, but from the beginning they have been far less studied or understood than his works on society, education, and church. Scholarship on Grundtvig's theory of myth has been almost entirely from the point of view either of theologians or of educators associated with the *højskole* movement.⁶ In Grundtvig's day, as to a large extent in ours, *højskole* and university were separate worlds, and although both took note of Grundtvig's first book on myth, the academic community distanced itself as Grundtvig became increasingly associated with popular education. As he noted in the introduction to his second book on myth, published in 1832 on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first, the scholarly mythographers had shown him no more courtesy in the interim than to act as though he either never had existed or was long dead and gone.⁷ Twentieth-century scholars of Old Norse are no different: apart from Axel Olrik⁸, who grants Grundtvig a brief and ambivalent mention in his survey of scholarship on Nordic myth, they have ignored him.

The second centenary of Grundtvig's birth in 1983 brought a new wave of publication on Grundtvig, and for the first time in recent history, there were contributions from outside the usual circles. Villy Sørensen's *Ragnarok*,⁹ a retelling of the Nordic cosmogony and eschatology based on Grundtvig's principles, scandalized *højskole*-Grundtvigians and gave rise to a bitter debate in the popular press.¹⁰ Villy Sørensen ignores or recasts the allegorical interpretations of the myths that had become associated with Grundtvig and fossilized in the *højskole* tradition, and instead interprets them psychologically. The fresh eyes of Ejvind Larsen¹¹ and Poul Borum,¹² two critics not usually concerned with Grundtvig, turned their attention to him in the anniversary year

³ *Nordens Mytologi eller Udsigt over Eddalæren for dannede Mænd der ei selv ere Mytologer* (København, 1808) rpt. *US* 1: 243-373.

⁴ *Nordens Mythologi eller Sindbilled-Sprog historisk-poetisk udviklet og oplyst* (København, 1832) rpt. *US* 5: 378-767.

⁵ *Græsk og Nordisk Mythologi for Ungdommen* (København, 1847).

⁶ Noteworthy recent studies from the *højskole* milieu include Jens Peter Ægidius, *Bragesnak: Nordiske myter og mytefortælling i dansk tradition (indtil 1910)*; *Bragesnak 2: Den mytologiske tradition i dansk folkeoplysning i det tyvende århundrede (1910-1985)*, Odense University Studies in Scandinavian Languages and Literatures 11 and 23 (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1985 and 1992); and Ole Vind, *Grundtvigs historiefilosofi*, Skrifter udgivet af Grundtvig-Selskabet 32 (København: Gyldendal, 1999).

⁷ *US* 5: 388.

⁸ Axel Olrik and Hans Ellekilde, *Nordens Gudeverden*, 2 vols. (København: Gyldendal, 1926) 1:14-16.

⁹ Villy Sørensen, *Ragnarok: En gudefortælling* (København: Centrum, 1982).

¹⁰ See e.g. Per Warming and Karen Marie Bonde, "Midtpunkt," *Jyllandsposten* 7 January 1983; Villy Sørensen, "Midtpunktet," *Jyllandsposten* 14 January 1983; Carsten Høgh, "'Ragnarok' – og hvad deraf fulgte . . ." *Højskolebladet* 14 (1983): 220-22.

¹¹ Ejvind Larsen, *Det Levende Ord: Om Grundtvig* (København: Rosinante) 1983.

¹² Poul Borum, *Digteren Grundtvig* (København: Gyldendal, 1983).

and were likewise quick to see the psychological possibilities in Grundtvig's method.

Scholars of Old Norse have traditionally regarded Grundtvig's passionately subjective reading of myth as irrelevant to serious (i.e. historical) interpretation. Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen speaks for most when he says that for Grundtvig, "the synthetic understanding, 'the *vision*,' has priority over the sources, which he rejects as late and spurious if they do not fit in with *his* interpretation. . . . Grundtvig does not, as he alleges in the introduction to *Nordens Mytologi* [1808], see edda in edda's own light."¹³ This is indisputably true: from a historical point of view Grundtvig has nothing to contribute to our understanding of the texts. But the same subjectivity that literary historians scorn has wide-reaching theoretical implications which have been ignored.

Grundtvig calls myth "sindbilled-sprog," the picture-language of the mind, and he presumes that the images of this language are common to the human spirit ("ånden"), to that which since Jung we call the collective unconscious. According to Jung's classical definition, myths are not invented, they are experienced: "Myths are original revelations of the preconscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings."¹⁴ Like dreams, myths find appropriate images to associate with the archetypes of the unconscious in order to show us what is going on in the areas of our psyches that are hidden from us. Grundtvig hopes that seeing how myths have awakened and made visible the archetypes in *his* mind will help others to recognize them in their own psyches.

Ejvind Larsen suggests that the insights gained from psychoanalysis in recent years can help us see the point of Grundtvig's method. He acknowledges that "what could be used was decided by what spoke to *him*," but argues that Grundtvig's emphasis on his own experience does not imply self-centeredness or a lack of interest in the concerns of others. Rather, Grundtvig intends his experience to be a model and an inspiration.¹⁵ Poul Borum likewise points to the centrality of this insight. True, Grundtvig uses the imagery of Nordic mythology widely (some would say wildly) in a variety of contexts in his authorship: "The gods function at once anecdotally, polemically, allegorically, symbolically, and typologically." But the "incomparable discovery" that Grundtvig made in 1808 and was to draw on the rest of his life, was of "the psychic process which takes place in time (history) and ends in a timeless, cultic paradise, where power and wisdom are united and where spirit joins soul and

¹³ Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen, *N. F. S. Grundtvig: Skæbne og Forsyn: Dyufirt i Grundtvigs nordisk-romantiske dramatik*, Skrifter Udgivet af Grundtvig-Selskabet 14 (København: Gyldendal, 1965) 20.

¹⁴ C. G. Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series 20, The Collected Works of C. G. Jung 9, 1 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2nd ed. 1968) 154.

¹⁵ Larsen 175.

body.”¹⁶ The meaning of myth is to evoke and reflect this process.

The process is what Carl Gustav Jung a century after Grundtvig would call individuation. According to Jung the human psyche is composed of two elements: the ego and the Self. The ego is the seat of subjective, conscious identity, one’s own awareness of who and what one is. The Self is the seat of objective identity, the supreme ordering principle of the entire contents of the psyche, unconscious as well as conscious, transpersonal as well as personal. The ego is the product of one’s personal experience; the Self includes also the inherited archetypes of the collective unconscious, that is, nothing less than the distilled summation of all human experience. The Self is the central archetype of wholeness, the presence of the Divine in us. The ego is who I think I am; the Self is all that I really am.

Individuation, the task of human existence, is the establishment of a right relationship between the two entities. This means first establishing the ego by separating it from the Self, and then after developing the ego and bringing the Self to consciousness, reuniting the two in such a way that they are integrated but not identified. One relinquishes ego awareness in such a way that one becomes conscious of participation in the transpersonal, while at the same time retaining ego awareness in such a way that one knows one is oneself and not God.¹⁷ The process is not linear, although ego separation and development tends to characterize the first half of life, and reintegration with the Self the second. It is cyclical or spiral, a repeated pattern of becoming conscious of the presence of various archetypes, separating them out from the Self, and then reintegrating them into the conscious psyche.

Myths are essential to this process. They form a bridge between the unconscious and conscious psyche by attaching symbolic images to the unconscious archetypes and representing the complex and painful struggle of separation and re-unification in narratives which consciousness can apprehend. Grundtvig saw all this in the image of Bifröst, the rainbow bridge: “The rainbow is a visual image of the invisible bridge between heaven and earth, between the worlds of the spirit and of the body, which picture-language sets up and reason must defend. The lovely play of colors is also an image of the source from which all spiritual understanding springs forth.”¹⁸ Because the process is

¹⁶ Borum 46.

¹⁷ On the process of individuation see Edward F. Edinger, *Ego and Archetype: Individuation and the Religious Function of the Psyche* (New York: Putnam, 1972); Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, Bollingen Series 42 (New York: Pantheon, 1954); and M.-L. von Franz, “The Process of Individuation,” in *Man and his Symbols*, ed. Carl G. Jung (New York: Dell, 1964) 157-254.

¹⁸ *Nordisk Mythologi* 1832, US 5: 675. Jung noted the significance of the rainbow-image in his work on alchemy as a metaphor for the individuation process: “The ‘*omnes colores*’ are frequently mentioned in the texts as indicating something like totality. They all unite in the *albedo*, which for many alchemists was the climax of the work. The first part was completed when the various components separated out from the chaos of the *massa confusa* were brought

transpersonal or common to all, myths have universal qualities. But the struggles take on a particular form in the life of each individual, so the interpretation of myth needs to be subjective, and myths need to be continually reinterpreted in each new situation if they are to remain meaningful.

Jung says that interpretation should be diachronic as well as synchronic: the living context of a myth is most important, but it cannot be fully understood apart from its historical context. The psychotherapist who lacks a historical knowledge of the archetypes observed in a patient “is not in a position to perceive the parallelism between his observations and the findings of anthropology and the humane sciences in general,” while an expert in mythology and comparative religion “is as a rule no psychiatrist and consequently does not know that his mythologems are still fresh and living . . . in the hidden recesses of our most personal life, which we would on no account deliver up to scientific dissection. . . . The individual images . . . need a context, and the context is not only a myth but an individual anamnesis.”¹⁹

Grundtvig knew about this from his own experience. Like Jung, he recognized the importance of understanding the historical context of a myth, but he was more adamant than Jung about the true meaning of a myth being the living meaning, i.e. the meaning perceived by the hearer. We read in *Nordens Mytologi* 1832, “It makes little or no difference to us what floated before the eyes of the myth-maker, because only that which we lay in the myth and what lies *comfortably* in it is good to preserve.”²⁰ Grundtvig resented what he regarded as the trivializing of myths by the mythographers of his time, who viewed myths as primitive attempts to explain natural phenomena. As Grundtvig saw it, the natural phenomena merely provided imagery for the description of inner processes: “When the myth-maker lifted his weary eyes to the heavens, he saw the light struggle against the darkness and against itself. And when he gazed into the depths of the human spirit, into himself, he perceived the outward battle to be no more than a weak symbol of the battle which made his whole being recoil.”²¹

Jung liked to speak of being “gripped” by a myth, and anyone familiar with Grundtvig will agree that he was nothing if not that. His case is typical: the actual process of individuation generally begins with a psychic trauma which

back to unity in the *albedo* and ‘all became one.’ Morally, this means that the original state of psychic disunity, the inner chaos of conflicting part-souls which Origen likens to herds of animals, becomes the ‘*vir unus*,’ the unified man.” In *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series 20, The Collected Works of C. G. Jung 14 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2nd ed. 1970) 285-86.

¹⁹ C. G. Jung, “The Psychological Aspects of the Kore,” in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series 20, The Collected Works of C. G. Jung 9, 1 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2nd ed. 1968) 189.

²⁰ *US* 5: 636.

²¹ *Nordens Mytologi* 1808, *US* 1: 333.

amounts to a sort of call.²² In 1805 the twenty-one-year-old Grundtvig took a job as tutor on an estate on Langeland and soon fell hopelessly in love with the lady of the house. The suffering caused by his apparently unrequited feelings led eventually to the breakthrough he called his “*asarus*” (literally, “*æsir-high*”). For two years he was high on the gods, utterly possessed by the archetypes. “Now I came to the beginning of my life,” he wrote in his journal in 1806,²³ “from now on I live in antiquity, and reality will never again make me its slave. . . .”²⁴ “My soul fought night and day, and I lived among the *æsir*; then my view of the doctrine of the *æsir* came into being.”²⁵ Falling in love, according to Jung, involves a projection of the anima, or feminine archetype of a man’s psyche.²⁶ As the individuation process begins, a man becomes conscious of his feminine side: it is “separated out” of his unconscious. The developing ego, which is masculine, has difficulty containing this archetype, so it is projected onto a woman. She in turn reflects back to the man his own feminine qualities, which he at first admires as hers, but eventually begins to re-assimilate into his own psyche, where they become a part of the conscious ego. Grundtvig’s poem, “*Synet*” (“The Vision”), written in 1807, shows his awareness of this process in his life.

In this short narrative poem Grundtvig describes a vision of a “Spirit” (“*ånden*”), loosely associated with his recently dead sister. Grundtvig tells her of his pondering of “this mysterious life,” and laments that unlike the Spirit, we can only regard “the one who is and was” in a mirror. He has in fact seen this image mirrored in “a woman”—Jung would say that by projecting his anima onto her he caught a glimpse of the Self—but the mirror broke and the picture cannot be re-constituted. The Spirit chastises him for looking unfeelingly and in the wrong place, and urges him to “*see*” the reality reflected in the Nordic myths he has been “staring” at for so long: “Stop staring and dare to see/ the image of the great one still standing/ in the never-frozen waters of Ifing!”²⁷ According to *Vafþrúðnismál* 16, Ifing is the river that separates the land of the gods and the land of the giants.²⁸ The myth shows Grundtvig that the Self is to be found at the boundary of consciousness and the unconscious, precisely where he found himself at the time of this experience. The fleeting glimpse of the projected Self he caught reflected in the beloved was but the first step, and

²² von Franz 169.

²³ *US* 1: 112.

²⁴ *US* 1:113.

²⁵ *US* 1: 114.

²⁶ A woman similarly projects the animus, the masculine archetype in a woman’s psyche.

²⁷ Chr. K. F. Molbech, ed., *Christian Molbech og Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig: En Brevvexling* (København, 1888) 199-205. The image of myth as a mirror is central in Grundtvig’s theory of myth: see e.g. *US* 5: 390, 476, 496, 513, 514, 520, 541, 542, 555, 556, 557, 617, 618,702; *Græsk og Nordisk Mythologi* vi, 25.

²⁸ *Edda: die Lieder des Codex regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, Germanische Bibliothek Reihe 4, Texte, ed. Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg: Karl Winter, 5th ed. 1983) 1: 47.

Grundtvig understands that the next will be the appropriation of what he saw to his own psyche.²⁹

The significance of this experience of young adulthood lies less in the unhappy infatuation than in the insight it precipitated. Grundtvig got over Fru Constance Leth, but his insight into the relevance of myth remained a guiding force throughout his life. In 1808 he wrote in *Nordens Mytologi* of his certainty of what he long had suspected: “the life of the gods would set the terms for mine.”³⁰ This means simply that Grundtvig discovered the unconscious and its archetypes, for which the gods provide symbols. His first published work on myth, “Lidet om Sangene i Edda,” was written in reaction to the publication of Jens Møller’s *Skirners Rejse*, a poem inspired by *Skírnismál*.³¹ Grundtvig, at the height of his “asarus” was deeply offended by this comic take-off on the eddic text. His treatise has often been regarded as the result of his juvenile identification with Freyr’s unhappy infatuation with the giantess and his resentment that anyone would find it amusing. But Grundtvig’s experience of the myth was much deeper. He saw in it the entire cosmogony and eschatology of the gods’ life and his own.

As Grundtvig interprets the myth of Freyr and Gerðr, the Norns have determined that the gods, who are enfeoffed with the eternal, must give up their eternity and assimilate themselves to the mortal in order to come under its laws and eventually fall. This is reflected in Freyr’s disarming of himself in order to obtain Gerðr. Óðinn is angry that Freyr has sat in Hliðskjálf, not because his dignity has been offended, but because the sight of Gerðr is “the first link in the chain of misfortune, which the others of necessity would follow.”³²

²⁹ Later in his life Grundtvig read this myth at the macrocosmic level, but the meaning for him remained the same. In *Græsk og Nordisk Mythologi for Ungdommen* (164-65) he sees the joining of gods and the giants “in a kind of marriage” on a “common ground” on the banks of the Ifing as symbolic of the reconciliation of “the spirit of history” and “the self-consciousness of all that is demonstrable.” The union of the unconscious and the ego in the Self mirrors (and is mirrored in) the relationship of history and science, “which can be tense enough in day-to-day experience, but becomes irreconcilable only when history has abandoned spirit (“ånden”) and tries like a zombie to scare the life out of people, or when science obstinately claims that the demonstrable is the only reality and with heartless arrogance tries to disturb the historical world of the spirit in human life by dismissing it as idle fantasy and delusion.” The same could be said of the dynamics of the individual psyche.

³⁰ “Deres *Liv* skulde, i sin Tid, vorde Betingelsen for *mit*.” *US* 1: 251. The phrase is almost certainly meant to echo Schelling’s famous phrase, “der Grund von Sein,” which makes it no less weighty. The role of myth in his life was even more clear to him in his middle age, as we see in *Nordens Mytologi* (1832): “. . . everyone who is conscious of his spiritual nature is such a wonderful mystery to himself, that he rejects nothing simply because it is strange . . . on the contrary, he constantly draws what is strange to himself, because in essence it resembles him, and because he expects to find in it the resolution of his mystery—which he certainly does not expect of that which he can see through as though it were nothing” (*US* 5: 400).

³¹ *Ny Minerva* (May 1806).

³² *US* 1: 132. The myth is rich in allusions to archetypal myths from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The view from Hliðskjálf resonates with the fruit of the tree of knowledge (Gen 2), the marriage of Frey and Gerda with the origin of the Nephilim (Gen 6), and the assimilation of the “eternal”

What gripped Grundtvig was the apocalyptic aspect of the myth. Indeed, he saw all the imagery and themes of Nordic myth as somehow related to its fundamental eschatological revelation. At the time of his “asarus” or initial breakthrough he was much taken with the romantic philosophy of F. W. J. Schelling. The opposition of contraries and its destined outcome was a principal element of Schelling’s world view. As M. H. Abrams neatly summarizes it, “The driving force of all process . . . is the compulsion within any element to pose, or else to pass over into, its opposite, or contrary, or antithesis, which in turn generates its own opponent, in a ceaseless movement toward a consummation which is the annulment, or else the stable equilibrium, of all oppositions.”³³ Schelling saw this pattern of original unity followed by separation and opposition followed by a destined return to unity as applicable to every aspect of existence. The archetypal pattern is that of apocalypse,³⁴ and as we have seen, of individuation, which itself is a kind of apocalypse or unveiling.

In the beginning, according to Grundtvig’s “asalære,” or doctrine of the Æsir, there was “Alfader,” the source of energy and life, and “mass” or “matter.”³⁵ As matter began to contract and expand life emerged in it, which meant that there now were two life-principles.³⁶ Thus the first opposition, energy (the gods) versus matter (the giants), came into being. In Grundtvig’s eyes all the myths told in the Poetic Edda and Snorri are variations on this single theme. Separations (and consequently creations) multiply on both sides of the opposition, but the power remains balanced. In the language of analytical psychology, this represents the relationship between the ego and the Self. In the beginning there is a unity of the two, but it is unconscious and chaotic. Once the ego begins gradually to distinguish itself from the Self, there is a long series of separations as the various archetypes of the unconscious (shadow, anima/animus, etc.) are constellated and identified. The ego becomes increasingly conscious, but also correspondingly alienated from the Self. The awareness of these oppositions is like an inner apocalypse—it is as though one’s world has been destroyed. But if one can contain the conflicts, that is, find meaning in them and integrate them back into the Self, then it is as though a

gods to the laws of mortality recalls Paul’s interpretation of the incarnation (Phil 2).

³³ M. H. Abrams, “Apocalypse: theme and variations,” *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature: Patterns, Antecedents, and Repercussions*, Ed. C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984) 346.

³⁴ As seen in the biblical Book of Revelation and many other apocalyptic myths. See Edward F. Edinger, *Archetype of the Apocalypse: A Jungian Study of the Book of Revelation* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

³⁵ See *Om Asalæren*, (US 1) 207-218, and *Nordens Mytologi*, (US 1) 270-273.

³⁶ A favorite theory of Schelling: see e.g. F. W. J. v. Schelling, *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur*, in K. F. A. Schelling, ed. *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schellings sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart/Augsburg 1856-61) 2: 1-343, trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, Texts in German Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988).

new world arises with all its possibilities.³⁷ In Grundtvig's version of the aftermath of Ragnarøk, "Energy must return to its source, and this happens, because Ragnarøk is the twilight of the Æsir, the evening of the day they themselves created. But it is likewise the dawn of true day. Balder is risen from Hel, and the Æsir cleansed of their striving for individuality. They no longer rule, but they are still the expression of energy, the strong arm of the eternal."³⁸ The archetypes have not been eliminated, but they have been re-incorporated and the Self re-constituted in a new form. The archetypes are still the source of energy, but the energy can be focused and directed. They no longer rule tyrannically from the unconscious or demand a separate existence for themselves as projections.

This victory is not achieved by one battle, and Grundtvig envisions the process of creation, opposition, fall, and renewal as a repeated cycle, moving gradually in a spiral motion towards the goal: "While other nations depict a single creation, the North shows us a double, almost triple creation, and the process still is not finished. While others let all life perish in the grave, our fathers begin theirs beyond it, standing powerfully in Valhalla and striving towards a life still higher. The Æsir advance with a majesty and fullness of power, unity, and harmony, which we elsewhere seek in vain."³⁹ Grundtvig knew this pattern in his own life as he experienced alternating periods of illuminating insight and chaotic psychosis, and this is undoubtedly why the "asalære" meant so much to him. He allowed himself to recognize the same processes in the myths and in his own psyche. The battles of the archetypal gods matched those of the archetypes within him, and by recognizing the correspondence he could engage in the battles knowing both the cost and the outcome.⁴⁰

Grundtvig's work on myth merits more scholarly consideration than it has received. While insisting on the importance of understanding history, it shifts the focus of interpretation to the synchronic or timeless meaning of myth, and reminds us that the true nature of myth is to be meaningful, if only we will allow it.

³⁷ This is the theme of Edinger's *Archetype of the Apocalypse*.

³⁸ *Om Asalæren* (US 1) 216.

³⁹ *Om Asalæren* (US 1) 206.

⁴⁰ It was a source of anguish for Grundtvig that the orthodox Lutheran Christianity of his day did not permit the Bible to be read in a similar manner, and this led to his famous assertion that the Bible "is only a book, a dead thing that in itself has nothing to say" ("Skal den Lutherske Reformation Virkelig Fortsættes?" US 5: 345).