Benign Structures. The Worldview of Danish National Poet, Pastor, and Politician N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872)

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Abstract
This paper presents a study of the central Danish 19th-century figure N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872) and his worldview. More precisely, by way of simple neural word embeddings we seek to plot Grundtvig’s worldview in attempt to tease out factors explaining for his cultural and religious success as a poet. We arrive at the conclusion that one factor for Grundtvig’s relative success could be found in his explicitly positive worldview fit for modern conditions.

Keywords
Danish Cultural Heritage, Worldview, Neural Word Embeddings, N.F.S. Grundtvig, Grundtvig’s Works, Grundtvigs Værker

1. Introduction: N.F.S. Grundtvig. A Cultural and Religious ‘Saint’

In Denmark N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872) plays the dual role of Church Father and Founding Father. In public discourse the 19th-century poet, pastor, historian, antiquarian, educator, and politician is regarded as one of the most (if not the) central figure in the Danish nation building process, as well as in the reformation or adaptation of Christianity to modern conditions: In short, he is regarded little short of a cultural and a religious saint.1 In scholarly literature it is widely acknowledged that Grundtvig sought to stimulate the process of assembling a collective Danish emotional consciousness based on a horizontal-contemporary axis incorporating the...
different strata within the socially heterogeneous “Folk” [the People], and on a vertical-historical axis connecting present-day Danes with forefathers and legendary characters. In social historian Benedict Anderson’s well-known phrasing, the emotional fabric intended by this attempted interlacing was an ‘imagined community’. Nowadays, Grundtvig’s cultural imprints are acknowledged by most Danes: “N.F.S. Grundtvig founded Danish democracy”; “N.F.S. Grundtvig established the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Denmark (folkekirken)”; “N.F.S. Grundtvig is the founder of the Danish school system”; “N.F.S. Grundtvig revived the pre-Christian Nordic tradition”; “N.F.S. Grundtvig is the most important writer of Christian hymns in Denmark”. These are surprisingly recurrent statements in Danish public media, deeming his intellectual activity more culturally important than the work of his world-famous contemporaries Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875).

2. N.F.S. Grundtvig: Highly Popular Hymnist

In addition to such statements, the public sphere – not least the political niches – are overflooded with quotes from his many well-known hymns and songs; due to their mere number – Grundtvig wrote no less than 1,600 very long hymns and songs –, they are conveniently versatile in political ideology and can be tweaked or cherry-picked into supporting any given agenda. But the main point here is, that politicians or public characters of different breeds still find it relevant to evoke Grundtvig in current-day debates. Seemingly, he can bolster any given person or any given argument and add a certain empathic ethos to and unyielding air around them. This situation is a result of the stable exposure to Grundtvig’s hymns and songs that Danes experience, we suggest. For a signature feature of Danish culture is a proneness to communal singing – in kindergardens, in elementary schools, at the workplace, in Folk High Schools, in civil societal associations, in church, in various private settings. And Grundtvig is a dominant hymnist and secular song writer. In illustration: he has written no less than a third of the close to 800 hymns in the 2003 Danish official hymnal.

3. Why did Grundtvig become so popular?

In this paper, we have set out to explore reasons for Grundtvig’s poetic success. He was by no means the only poet of the 19th-century. A long line of poets, hymnists, and song writers joined him in his endeavor to improve and boost Danish literature during this historically critical period. Furthermore, a line of hymnic projects in Denmark preceded him. A high-profile but remarkably unsuccessful candidate who predated Grundtvig would be Bishop N.E. Balle (1744-1816). He commissioned a hymnal in the late 18th century that would meet the taste of an enlightened bourgeois elite. It was published in 1798 as Evangelisk-kristelig Psalmebog til Brug ved Kirke- og Huus-Andagt [Evangelical-Christian Hymnal for Church and Private Use]. It came in the wake of the national debate on the quality of the hymnbook, which included contributions from the weekly periodical, Jesus and Reason, edited by the theologian, Otto Horrebow (1769-1823). His purpose was to present Christianity as “the only, eternal, and true religion of Reason” and it should take as its starting-point the development of the individual’s feelings of happiness. Such was the effect of this impulse that theologians and civil servants...
began to look around for hymns that could “express happy feelings” [3], and a committee was set up to produce a hymnbook that appealed more to those who were critical of their contemporary Church as well as to an increasing individualism among the bourgeoisie. The new hymnbook was full of deism and Enlightenment Christianity, purified of the old myths, superstitions, and metaphysics. Unsurprisingly, there was opposition from the rural parishes, and a complaint that “the Devil has disappeared without trace from the hymnal” (p. 165) [3] – and the hymnal was deemed unsatisfactory, bland, and boring: it did not catch on. N.E. Balle’s *Evangelisk-kristelig Psalmebog til Brug ved Kirke- og Huus-Andagt* was to a great extent an attempt to replace the so-called *Kingo’s Salmebog* [Kingo’s Hymnal] of 1699. This was a very popular hymnbook that contained many but not solely hymns written by Danish priest, poet, and Bishop Thomas Kingo (1634-1703). The problem with the Kingo hymns was that they were not enlightenment compliant and that they did not invite for meditations over how to achieve individual and national happiness. Quite the contrary, they promoted an early modern morbid *memento mori* ethos. Thomas Kingo’s concern with the physical factors of death is best illustrated by his hymn from 1674, ‘The sun is on the wane’, no. 761 in the current Danish hymnal, which contains the following lines: “Dark grave indeed/with worms at feed/is our last fate on earth.../Go, sack of worms, and sleep,/for God will wake you in the morn/to everlasting life.” As Danish scholar of religion Hans J. Lundager Jensen satires, Kingo saw “cadavers, where one might naively see living bodies” (p. 25) [4]. Grundtvig agreed with Balle that the morbid aspects of the still popular Kingo hymns were inappropriate and outdated. But he did not think that *Evangelisk-kristelig Psalmebog til Brug ved Kirke- og Huus-Andagt* had solved the problem – the lyrical quality was to poor and the erasure of the long line of Christian fantastic features (monsters, miracles etc.) straight-out demonstrated poor judgement, in his opinion. Conversely, Grundtvig praised the Kingo hymns for their lyrical quality but had problems with the dark outlook upon life that they promoted. And it seems that Grundtvig’s evaluation was correct. At least he eclipsed both Balle and Kingo; and, getting a bit ahead of our analysis, he did so by offering a different worldview – one more fit or relevant.

4. Structures of a Worldview

No other poet comes close to Grundtvig’s position in Denmark. This fact might obviously have something to do with aesthetic quality of the lyrics as well as of the melodic side of the song; it might also have something to do with authorship brand that can be but does not have to be affected by aesthetic features. In this study, we leave such aspects aside and focus on the worldview representation emerging from the lyrics. Our premise is that hymns and songs that enters a given cultural marked and quickly dominates it, such as Grundtvig’s did, must be offering something in demand. They must be the answer to some need. And being as Grundtvig was by no means the only agent on the market, it would be reasonable to assume that there is something in the lyrics, and in his authorship as such, that people found attractive or at least relevant. Our hypothesis is that in a period of significant cultural, political, and religious change this something is to be sought out in the general outlook on life – in the worldview conveyed in the texts. By ‘worldview’ we mean to invoke American Social Anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s definition. That is, a sort of ‘background knowledge’ of the world, and possible
adjoining spheres, and the mechanisms driving life herein. That is: basic ideas of 'the ontic' (of what and why things and creatures exist) and under which conditions they do so. In short, we wish to map out Grundtvig’s understanding of the world. We do this on the basis of a data set consisting of Grundtvig’s published writings.

5. The Grundtvig Data

The dataset, Grundtvig’s Works, represents the total number of works published in Grundtvig’s lifetime (N = 1073). The first work published is dated 1804, the last one 1872. This material has been OCR prepared and is being furnished with XML markup by the staff of Center for Grundtvig Studies, Aarhus University, following TEI guidelines. Currently 54% of the material is fully annotated. The process of enrichment is, however, ongoing: the project’s scheduled completion date is 2030. The data set comprises approximately 37 K pages, has a median document size of four pages, and contains 4MM word-tokens distributed over 115 K word-types. The data for the current study are available at: https://github.com/centre-for-humanities-computing/grundtvig-data. Furthermore, we have developed a custom XML parser available to facilitate third-party data exploration. The parser is available at: https://github.com/centre-for-humanities-computing/GrundtvigParser The way we went about tweaking out Grundtvig’s worldview from this material was by way of the well-known text analysis strategy: simple neural word embeddings.

6. Simple Neural Word Embeddings

Neural word embeddings are learned low-dimensional representations of discrete data as dense arrays. Condensing a high dimensional space, such as the Grundtvig’s Works vocabulary, into a denser one, the procedure allows for visualizations of, e.g., a given term’s ‘semantic habitat’. Put in another way, it allows for teasing out the associative structures by which a given word (or a given compound of words) is nested within a corpus. As is well known, “the map is not the territory” [5], but as is similarly well-known functional maps do, nevertheless, retain certain relevant properties of the territory it seeks to represent. This is also the case with neural word embeddings. While reducing the complexity of a high dimensional semantic space, relevant properties from the original space is preserved. Further, they are preserved in a way affording them to be conveyed as geometrical ratios [6]. This makes it possible to display semantic structures with an enhanced clarity. The structural representations, or the embeddings, are ‘learned’. That is, they are the product of a training process over the data in an artificial neural network. A neural network uses a so-called auxiliary control task to iteratively learn the best possible embedding of a word (ex. by minimizing prediction error). In this particular study, we deployed a so-called hierarchical softmax technique to train the neural network [7]. This choice was partly based on the fact that this approach has proved itself advantageous for dealing with infrequent words [8]. In order to explore the associative structure between given terms in the Grundtvig data, we constructed an algorithm that utilize geometric distances between neural embeddings to create (seeded) hierarchical semantic graphs. This algorithm generated graphs by computing the distance between, on the one hand, a given seed term (or compounds
of seed terms) and the corpus lexicon in toto, on the other, using the inverse trigonometric arccosine function. The series of seed terms, to evoke Grundtvig’s worldview, we quite simply decided to be the dominating ontic domains in his writing: HEAVEN, EARTH, and HELL. For each seed, the algorithm excerpted a pre-set number of primary associations. These are the terms with the shortest distance to the seed terms. For each of the primary association-terms the algorithm extracted a pre-set number of association; these associations to the primary associations are taken as secondary associations to the seed term. For this study the number of primary and secondary associations, respectively, was 10. The next step was to compute the distance between the respective categories of terms (seeds, primary associations, secondary associations); subsequently the bulk of terms were connected based on their distance under a given threshold estimated from the distance variance structure. At the final stage, semantic clusters (or ‘communities’) were unearthed by way of a so-called greedy optimization method: the Louvain method [9]. Visually, the graphs render terms as nodes and thresholded distances as edges. For reading purposes, node colour was chosen to specify the given term’s semantic group; further, the UPPER CASE was used to distinguish seeds and primary associations from secondary associations rendered in the lower case.

7. Analysis: The Benign Structures of Grundtvig’s Semantic Worldview

What we see in the visualization of Grundtvig’s semantic worldview in Figure 1 below is that the semantic tissue binding together the spheres of Himmel [Heaven], Jord [Earth], and helvede [Hell], is the radiant, divine Soel [Sun] – embraced or enclosed by a garden-like zone. The structure holding together Grundtvig’s conception of the universe is, in other words, remarkably ‘positive’, warm, fertile, and benign. Further, the central position of the divine sun signals a strong and sustainable integration of the godly and the human sphere. Let us delve into this aspect of Grundtvig’s writings. ‘Hell’ enjoys no such connection. In fact, ‘Hell’, and the semantic neighbor ‘Death’, are strikingly isolated in Grundtvig’s worldview – pushed out into the far and loosely connected edges. ‘Heaven’ on the other hand seems to mingle and intertwine with the earthly sphere. The incitement of ‘Heaven’ and the suppression of ‘Hell’ is not a trivial trait. A so-called world-denying outlook – stressing the malignant, hellish qualities of earth and life on it – formed within the world religions in the centuries leading up to the Common Era’s beginning [10]. It is a classical argument that this development undergirded anthropocentrism and human exploitation of natural resources, e.g. [11]. In the Protestant traditions the world-denying outlook fared particularly well within the variety of awakenings convulsing in Europe and the Americas in the 17th, 18th, and 19th century. But evidently not in Grundtvig’s mindset – a mindset imprinted in his successful poetry. Grundtvig provided a positive, world-affirming outlook relevant for 19th-, 20th-, and 21st-century Danes experiencing increasing levels of comfort and to whom ‘blessing’ was and is a more plausible semantic framework than ‘damnation’. In other words, the embedding of Heaven, Earth, and Hell points to the possible explanation for Grundtvig’s poetic success: He wrote lyrics imbued with a worldview fit for or culturally sustainable in modernity.
Figure 1: The Semantic Worldview of N.F.S. Grundtvig. The center of the graph conjoins a group of ‘solar’ terms [Soel (sun), SKINNER (shines), stiger (rises), straale (beem/shines), glad (glow)] girded by zone of fertility-horticultural or Eden-like terms [haven (the garden), PARADIS (paradise), EDEN (Eden), DUGG (dew), regn (rain)]. To the left, this zone seamlessly morphs into a cluster of heavenly terms [HIMMERIGE (Heavenly Kingdom), herligheds (glory’s), lys (light), kildevæld (fountain)]. To the right, it gradually goes through terms indicating correspondence and contact [PORT (gate), DØR (doorway)] becomes a group of earthly terms [JORDERIGE (earthly kingdom), JORD (earth), JORDEN (the earth), MARKEN (the field)]. In the upper outskirts of the graph, HELVEDE (hell) lingers loosely connected to the contrast term HIMLEN (heaven) and to it’s semantic partner mørket (the darkness).
8. Discussion: The Benign Structures in Grundtvig’s Writings

Grundtvig was more interested in life before, rather than after, death. He represented a Christianity that acknowledged life on earth as being fundamentally good, in contrast to the strongly ‘tantric’ focus on suffering and death which had exerted a large and varied influence on western Christianity since its early days of the Christ movement. Grundtvig insisted that even Jesus’ life and violent death should be seen as a story of “the happiest human life” (p. 227) [12]. Grundtvig’s ‘jubilant’ acceptance of life on earth is apparent in his hymns and in the embedding of Figure 1. The visualization echoes the hymns full of earthly joys and beings: skylarks, flowers, linden trees, beechwoods, rushes, dew, beaches, clouds, thunder, lightning, stars and suns, the morning sunrise and the evening sunset, noonday and midnight hours, the wind in the trees, tongues and voices, songs and hearts, hands, smiles, eyes etc. In other words, Grundtvig paints situations and positions that singers of his hymns could be expected to find themselves in, and which he never encourages them to leave. On the contrary, his poetry is a “humble recognition” (p. 71) [13] and a respectful celebration of this earthly life as God’s creation – a “song-sacrifice” that rises from “our lips to Heaven” (p.4) [14]. On this point Grundtvig’s hymns have clear links to the archaic songs of praise in the Old Testament – ‘archaic’ in the sense used by Robert N. Bellah in his theories of religion and cultural evolution connoting world-affirmative logics and pre-occupations with themes of fertility. It is of further interest that in contrast to certain theological thinking from the 18th century onwards which appeared to undermine the Old Testament source-material, Grundtvig saw no qualitative difference between the Old and the New Testament (p. 66 et passim) [15]. This is in line with his view that priority should be given to the living church congregation that he thought imbued with the Holy Spirit rather than to the ‘dead letters’ of the Bible, whether they be in the Old or the New Testament. The Gospel preceded the gospels, he argued. In similar vein, the point of gravity in Grundtvig’s hymnwriting is the Earth below rather than Heaven above – for Grundtvig the earth “is significant in itself” (p.36) [16]. Grundtvig even conceives life after death in earthly terms, often as a pleasant garden recalling summer holiday memories [13]. Time and again he employs the term “God’s garden” to depict the afterlife, not least in his existential hymns about death and in his eschatological hymns about the time after the second coming of Christ. The garden as an image of life after death has a long Christian history: McDannell and Lang demonstrate the role played by Eden and the rose-garden in the Middle Ages and in Renaissance ideas of life after death (p. 70 et passim; 112-124) [17]. At the same time, we hear in Grundtvig’s application of the image in his famous hymn ‘Then the wilderness shall bloom/ like a rosy bower’ an echo of Martin Luther’s vision of the restoration and cleansing of the earth after the Day of Judgement, when Heaven and earth will be a new paradise (ibid., 152) [17]. “Our garden round with happiness is bordered”, Grundtvig stated in one of his many ‘garden’ poems. His focus on the garden is later expanded into a special interest in horticulture among Grundtvigians in the second half of the 19th century. In Grundtvig’s thinking the earthly garden as a vision of paradise overshadows the celestial light of Heaven that had been its main rival in Christian imagery since scholasticism (p. 80 et passim) [17]. There is plenty of ‘light’ in Grundtvig’s hymns, but his interest in the powerful, holy sun lies more in the fact that it beams down on Earth. Moreover, for Grundtvig the special status of the Earth has a parallel in the decimated status of Hell [18] mentioned above. He does not often mention Hell, but when he does, it is in line with his dedication to
'this side of the grave', and in contrast to the view of Hell in the Evangelisk-kristelig Psalmebog til Brug ved Kirke- og Huus-Andagt of 1798, where the divine sphere dwindles even as the life sphere of the sinner is emphasised. In Grundtvig’s hymns the earthly world is given meaning by the very fact that it is divinely created for humans: "without You/ empty is the very earth", he writes in the hymn, "Come, God Holy Spirit, come"(1837), implying that the Earth is in fact not empty. It is swarming with life, with beings, with content, and occasionally God reaches out his "hand from above! Its radiance reaches our transient clay," thus emphasizing the link between the two spheres, Grundtvig observes.

Many writers have rightly pointed out the close connection between the earthly-human and the heavenly-divine in Grundtvig’s thinking. A good example is his reworking of Jacob’s dream at Bethel in Gen 28: 10-22, since Jacob was also “one of Grundtvig’s key figures” (p. 125) [19]. This was a story that he returned to time and again. In all its brevity it tells how one evening Jacob on a journey in the desert lies down to rest with a stone as his pillow; he dreams of God’s angels going up and down a stairway, at the top of which is God, who promises to watch over Jacob and his people. Jacob wakes up in fear: “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.” Scholars, most prominently perhaps German scholar of religion Rudolf Otto in his (contested) classic Das Heilige, see the passage as emblematic of the Old Testament view that between the human and the divine spheres there is an ontological difference. Jacob does not attempt to ascend the ladder. On awakening he is seized with fear over having spent the night in a place of whose status he was unaware (p.8-9) [4]. This is the biblical plotline. In Grundtvig’s poem of the story, entitled ‘Jacob’s dream’ (1837), however, the distance and thus the fear are notably underplayed. Jacob lies down “under open heaven” with a “stone as resting-pillow”. The moon is shining, and the stars are twinkling, as he lies down “in prayer to rest”; immediately he falls asleep “in heaven’s lodge”. In other words, he is at peace in the arms of nature (p.125-127) [19]. In his dream he sees “the King of all Kings”, who vows that Jacob will be the founder of “tribes throughout the earth”. When the vision is over, he exclaims, “that Heaven was so close I did not know!” He sets off “hopefully in the Lord’s name”, even while the lark is singing “sweetly in the morning sun”. He renamed the place ‘Bethel’ and calls it “the Lord’s house in Heaven’s meadow”. This is a remarkably unproblematic, carefree image of a situation of contact between the godly and the human sphere. Notably one going against the grain of the tabu so clearly accentuated in the Old Testament version encouraging the intended reader to avoid the ‘glory of Jahve’ at any cost. For Grundtvig, however, contact between heavenly agents and humans are unproblematic, benign events to be sought after. In fact, he points to what he thought of as an infrastructure of communication between the different spheres: an everyday stairway to heaven is accessible through the “amazing musical scale” (tonestige) (Grundtvig 1825, 157) that hymnsinging represents. This is the center of Grundtvig’s understanding of the divine-human relationship which allows him to conclude that ”the poetic element in humankind manifests itself in striving on Earth to be reminded of Heaven” (p. 122) [14]. His hymns and songs seek to mediate the myriad earthly concerns with the divine presence behind them, as in the (for Skandinavians) well-known Christmas hymn, where the stairway of Jacob’s vision once again appears: “Lovely is the midnight sky/beautiful to see on high,/where the golden stars are blinking,/where they smile in concert winking/us to join them up above.”
References
