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## ***Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?* - New Perspectives on Tolkien's Theological Dilemma and his Sub-Creation Theory**

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### Abstract

In the 1920s and 1930s Tolkien's developing, and to all appearances pagan, legendarium posed a theological dilemma to its devoutly Christian author. How could it be reconciled with his faith? There are striking parallels with the Danish theologian, poet and philologist N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872). This paper will try to establish whether Tolkien's answer, which is only partly to be found in "On Fairy-Stories", was directly influenced by Grundtvig's attempts at reconciling Norse myths and Christendom.

### Additional Keywords

N.F.S.; Grundtvig; Christian Myth; Norse Myth; Tolkien: legendarium; sub-creation; theology

# *Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?* – New Perspectives on Tolkien’s Theological Dilemma and his Sub-Creation Theory

Nils Ivar Agøy

**Abstract:** In the 1920s and 1930s Tolkien’s developing, and to all appearances pagan, *legendarium* posed a theological dilemma to its devoutly Christian author. How could it be reconciled with his faith? There are striking parallels with the Danish theologian, poet and philologist N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872). This paper will try to establish whether Tolkien’s answer, which is only partly to be found in “On Fairy-Stories”, was directly influenced by Grundtvig’s attempts at reconciling Norse myths and Christendom.

**Keywords:** N.F.S. Grundtvig, Christian Myth, Norse Myth, Tolkien: *legendarium*, sub-creation, theology

This paper takes as its point of departure Tolkien’s “sub-creation theory” as presented in his 1939 essay “On Fairy-Stories”. The theory is interpreted partly as an answer to a theological dilemma that had confronted Tolkien in the 1920s and early 1930s. Tolkien’s ambitious project of writing a “mythology for England”, which he had begun during the First World War, soon ran into trouble. With precious little old mythological material related specifically to England to work from, Tolkien eventually had to write most of the *legendarium* from his own imagination, only occasionally able to weave in strands of authentic myths and traditions from the “North-West of the Old World”. As we know, he nevertheless had the sense of “discovering”, not “inventing”. But what he discovered did not seem to mix at all well with his orthodox brand of Catholic Christianity. The grand mythological themes he wanted to address inevitably trespassed on to the territory of Theology. To the limited extent that he was able to work from ancient material, what he was transmitting were indubitably Pagan traditions. In the

first versions of his *legendarium*, so-called “Gods” figured strongly. They were limited, intriguing and impulsive like the Norse Gods, and even counted a couple of ethically very shady war-gods in their midst. The questions inevitably arose: Should a Christian be writing this sort of thing at all? Would not a Christian spend his time more fruitfully, and to the greater glory of God, doing something else? Could he justify placing Pagan mythology in a favourable light?

Tolkien dealt with these difficulties in two distinct ways. One was to experiment and re-write; he changed his “Gods” to “gods” and later to “Valar”, he deleted references to Thor and Njord, he put in the Catholic Purgatory only to take it out again – and gradually he was left with a structure fundamentally consonant with Christianity.<sup>1</sup> The other was to make a three-fold statement – in “Mythopoeia”, “On Fairy-Stories” and “Leaf by Niggle” (one could also include “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics”) – to the effect that writings such as his were not only not contrary to Christianity, but had a value of their own in helping us to see

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<sup>1</sup> The specifically Christian character of the later versions of the *legendarium* (including *The Lord of the Rings*) has been frequently overlooked despite the wealth of theological clues. Middle-earth is strictly monotheistic, God is all-powerful and good, and He has created the universe from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). A sharp distinction is drawn between the Creator and His Creation. The Creation is not eternal, its history is linear, with a beginning and an end. This combination of features is unique to Judeo-Christian beliefs. Tolkien does not describe the initial Fall of Man, but presupposes it (Tolkien, 1977b, p. 141, cf. Tolkien, 1981, p. 147 ff. p. 203 ff.). This contradicts Lobdell’s theory (1981, chapter III) that not all humans in Middle-earth were affected by original sin). Many other testimonies to the underlying Christianity may be found in the less lofty levels of the *legendarium*.

Of course, the Christianity of the *legendarium* is not complete, nor is it intended to be. Set in a pre-Christian age, it lacks the Incarnation, “an infinitely greater thing than anything I would dare to write” in Tolkien’s words (1981, p. 237). What he wanted was a story that could be “accepted . . . shall we say baldly, by a mind that believes in the Blessed Trinity” (Tolkien, 1981, p. 146).

the world as it really is, and giving consolation in that they affirm the Christian hope, sometimes even giving far-off glimpses of God's fairy-story for Man, the *Evangelium* itself. In using his imagination to make fairy-tales and myths, Man was exercising his God-given power of "sub-creation". When God made Man in His, the Creator's image (Genesis 1, 26-27), He intended that Man, too, should create.<sup>2</sup>

In the view taken here – that the "sub-creation theory" was in part a response to a strongly felt personal dilemma – it is not surprising that this theory has usually been regarded as original, as a unified statement. As for the separate elements in it, however, most may be found somewhere or other within the vast reaches of European philosophy and theology. Christian theology has always theorized on the exact nature of the Image of God in Man; and to identify it with human creativity in some form was an early suggestion, eagerly taken up by nineteenth century Romantic philosophers.<sup>3</sup> The view that non-Biblical myths may contain glimpses of truth is also ancient. Among certain influences close to Tolkien in time and space are George MacDonald, G. K. Chesterton and Owen Barfield, with Ernst Cassirer and Dorothy L. Sayers as strong additional possibilities.<sup>4</sup> In the following, we will explore the possibility that Tolkien's "sub-creation theory" was fundamentally and decisively influenced by the writings of the Danish theologian, poet, historian, mythographer and educationalist, Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872).

Grundtvig is a towering figure in Danish and Norwegian cultural history, with – especially in Denmark – an influence so permeating that he has become part of the cultural wallpaper. He was an untiring advocate of freedom: of expression, in education and in religious life. He started a theological movement that was to change both the Danish and the Norwegian church in important ways. He was also Scandinavia's greatest hymn-writer – more than one third of the hymns in the current Danish hymn-book are his. And he is remembered for his lifelong efforts to actualize and transmit Old Scandinavian mythology and history to new generations. Together with his beloved Danish mother tongue, the old mythology, rather than imported culture and school Latin and German, should form the basis of education and cultural life. This strong emphasis on national traditions and language is perhaps one reason why Grundtvig is so little known outside Scandinavia. Very little of his enormous and thematically diverse literary production has ever been

translated into other languages.

In effect, Grundtvig did for the Danes what Tolkien wanted to do for the English: he wrote a mythology for his people. In the heyday of Romanticism and national awakenings his undertaking was by no means unique. It was not qualitatively different from Lönnroth's better-known work to shape the *runos* preserved in Finnish popular tradition into the national epic *Kalevala*, or Wilhelm Grimm's attempt "to fit together all the bits and pieces of Germanic heroic literature" (Shippey, cited in Agøy, 1992, p. 28). Out of the historically disparate, often defaced and ill-fitting shards of Norse mythology, folklore and history, Grundtvig built a single dramatic structure, spanning all the ages of the world. Although the structure was artificial, Grundtvig believed that he was not inventing anything new, but rather poetically restoring the "image-language" (*Billedsprog*) of his forebears to its original unity and splendour. Like Tolkien a century later, Grundtvig believed in the incalculable intrinsic value for a people of its own mythology. In Grundtvig's view, myths were the repository of a people's specific understanding of reality, and were in a sense prophetic. From its myths one could read the people's destiny.<sup>5</sup>

When Grundtvig was first overcome by *Asarusen*, "the intoxication of the Aesir", as a young man, he did not regard it as incompatible with his Christian faith, although some of his contemporaries regarded him as more Pagan than Christian at the time. Grundtvig, by then a full-fledged Lutheran theologian, in 1808 wrote that he "prostrated himself" at the altar of the old Norse Gods (Rønning, 1907-14, II, 1, p. 89).<sup>6</sup> He believed that Christianity was a further development of Paganism and that there was actually no fundamental conflict between the two. To him, Christ was simply "a purer son of the All-father than Odin".<sup>7</sup> This syncretist view is vividly illustrated in some famous lines from an 1808 poem:

Høje Odin! Hvide Krist!  
Sletted ud er Eders Tvist,  
Begge Sønner af Alfader.  
*Mighty Odin! Christ the White!*  
*Your feud has now been wiped away,*  
*[ye are] both sons of the All-father.*

In 1810, all that was to change. In an intense personal crisis, Grundtvig was converted to "serious Christianity" and remained an orthodox Lutheran for the rest of his life. Now, for the first time, the relationship between Christianity and Norse mythology came to constitute an existential problem

<sup>2</sup> Tolkien's theory will not be presented in full format here. References to the four works mentioned in this paragraph will only be given occasionally.

<sup>3</sup> Some parallels and useful further references are given in Vink (1990).

<sup>4</sup> Of Chesterton's books, *The Everlasting Man* and *Orthodoxy* are the most interesting ones here. Chesterton believed that, as it was objectively true that God had created the world, the Christian truth must necessarily "break through" into it continually, independent of the direct Revelation in Christ. He also suggested that History is God's fairy-tale for humanity. George MacDonald believed that the Cross and Resurrection experience is constantly re-created in the human imagination, which he saw as an "image of the imagination of God": see Duriez, 1992, p. 127, cf. p. 170. On influence from Barfield and Sayers, see Flieger, 1983, chapters III and IV and Vink, respectively. See also Grant, 1979, p. 94, Bergmann, 1977, and Hidal, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> The value of myth is forcefully argued in Grundtvig, 1832, especially pp. 65 ff. Cf. Aronson, 1960, p. 199 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Rønning, 1907-14, II, 1, p. 85 and p. 159. Cf. Thaning, 1983, pp. 20 ff.

<sup>7</sup> ". . . en renere søn af Alfader end Odin". Cited in Rønning, 1907-14, II, 1, p. 159. Cf. Grell, 1980, p. 22.

for him. He never forgot with what anguish he finally affirmed, in 1810, that Christ was the only way to salvation “for those who know of his birth” (Rønning, 1907-14, II, 1, p. 202).

This religious about-face initially led him to renounce his earlier decision to “devote his life and his power to raising a speaking stone on the grave mound of Pagan antiquity”: “a Christian had more important things to do”.<sup>8</sup> In Aulë-like desperation, he even considered burning the all-but-finished manuscript of a large cycle of poems based on the Volsung and Nivlung traditions. He eventually published the poems, but he did add last-minute Christianizing conclusions, and repented in the foreword his previous “harmful and irresponsible” (*daarlig og letsindig*) words about the wild and blood-stained “idols and heroes of antiquity” (Grundtvig, 1904-9, I, p. 553).<sup>9</sup> However, he could not for long resist the call of the North. He fought desperately to find safe passage over the slippery theological slopes that lead thither.<sup>10</sup> And gradually, he seemed to discern a way. In opposition to the philosophical and theological Establishment, Grundtvig stressed the Creation as a fundamental theme of theology.<sup>11</sup> This led to a position on Natural Theology that was rare for that day and age. He emphasized God’s creation as an on-going process, rejecting the Enlightenment view that it was an act completed long ago. Created Man always searched for his Creator, and struggled to define what being human meant. Among Pagans – defined as people cut off by time or space from the revelation of Christ – the search and the struggle had to take Pagan forms, resulting in mythologies which were therefore not necessarily objectionable. Before his religious crisis Grundtvig had regarded Christianity as the perfect, original myth, a myth that had actualized itself in History.<sup>12</sup> This view survived 1810, nor did Grundtvig ever have any difficulties in admitting that Pagan mythologies contained glimpses of the Truth that “in the fullness of Time descended corporeally and lit a Light in the Dark, that threw

its radiance backwards to the beginnings of the world and shot its rays out to its end.”<sup>13</sup> It followed that even Pagans could have visions that, although confused, also contained elements of truth.

Pagans who, in the cosmic struggle between Good and Evil, chose Good, deserved “admiration and lenient judgement in a sinful world”.<sup>14</sup> Pagans were merely people who had not yet become Christians.

Grundtvig found that Norse mythology, in particular, contained so much of the truth as to constitute a “separate expression of the Mosaic-Christian view of Man, his conditions and history.” (Grell, 1980, note 49, p. 195).<sup>15</sup> In Grundtvig’s terminology, it had “universal-historic” importance, an importance to be rivalled only by the Old Testament. The same Spirit that spoke to the prophets of the Hebrews also spoke to the scalds of the North, though his voice was for them harder to discern. Where the revelation in Christ offers mankind a true expression of its relationship to the eternal things, Norse mythology explains humanity’s relationship to the temporal, to the world.<sup>16</sup> Thus it affirms and complements Christianity, and studying it is a praiseworthy, indeed necessary enterprise. To become a true Christian, Man must first learn to know himself as Man: “*Menneske først og Christen saa*”, in a famous phrase. This was simply not possible without knowledge of the spirit and philosophy of one’s own people – in the case of Scandinavia embedded in Norse mythology.<sup>17</sup>

Grundtvig’s very positive evaluation of mythology presupposed a sharp division between “paganism” (or “mythology”) on the one hand and “idolatry”, the actual worship of Pagan deities, on the other. Grundtvig believed that while Norse mythology was “the Northern Pagans” natural philosophy and image-language, the “*idolatry*, the *worship* of Odin, Thor and Frey and their images instead of the only invisible God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, was . . . an uninspired *distortion* of the original Paganism”.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>8</sup> “. . . ofre sit Liv og sin Kraft til at rejse paa Hedenolds Gravhøj en talende Sten”, cited in Grundtvig, 1904-1909, I, p. 546.

<sup>9</sup> The prevailing critical view is that Grundtvig seriously flawed his work by introducing the changes. Some critics have felt that Tolkien, too, damaged his *legendarium* by making it conform with Christianity. They feel that it lost some of its original freshness, vigour and ambiguity in the process.

<sup>10</sup> On the central position of this dilemma for Grundtvig, see for instance the quote in Thaning, 1963, p. 48.

<sup>11</sup> See Grell, 1980, pp. 31, 36; cf. Aronson, 1960, p. 167.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Grundtvig, 1983, pp. 99 ff.

<sup>13</sup> “. . . i Tidens Fylde legemlig nedsteeg og tændte et Lys i Mørket, der kastede sit Skin tilbage mot Verdens Begyndelse og udskiød sine Straaler til dens Ende” (Grundtvig, 1983, p. 81). Cf. Grundtvig, 1832, pp. 370 ff., p. 384; Grell, 1980, p. 114; Rønning, 1907-14, III, 1, p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> “Beundring of skaasom Bedømmelse i en syndig Verden” (Grundtvig, 1832, pp. 98 ff.). Cf. Thaning, 1963, p. 48.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Grundtvig, 1983, p. 184, “Nordens Mytologi er Verdenshistoriens Billedsprog” in Grell, 1988, pp. 91, 157; and Thaning, 1963, p. 451.

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that this does not reflect any division of human life into a “spiritual” and a “temporal” sphere. Such a separation was wholly foreign to Grundtvig’s theology. Cf. Grundtvig, 1832, pp. 65 ff., Thaning, 1983, pp. 51 ff. For a poetical defence of Norse mythology as valuable to Christians, see “Gylden-Aaret” [The Golden Year] (1834) and especially “Nordens Aand” [The Spirit of the North] (1834) in Grundtvig, 1904-1909, VIII.

<sup>17</sup> See for instance Grundtvig, 1832, pp. 65 ff., Thaning, 1963, p. 52, pp. 630 ff., p. 705; Thaning, 1983, p. 95.

<sup>18</sup> “. . . som de nordiske Hedningers naturlige tankegang og Billedsprog, men *Afguderiet, Dyrkelsen* af Odin, Thor og Frey og deres Billeder istedenfor den eneste usynlige Gud, Himmelens og Jordens Skaber, det var ligesaavel en aandløs *Forvanskning* af det oprindelige Hedenskab” (Grundtvig, 1983, p. 199). Grundtvig goes on to explain that the Christian faith underwent a similar distortion in that Christians started to worship saints and their relics “som Helgen-Tilbedelsen og Billed-Dyrkelsen i Pavedømmet var og er en *aandløs Forvanskning* af den oprindelige Christendom. Derfor fødte ogsaa vore Nordiske Fædre, da de første lærde at kiende *Christendommen* og den *Bibelske*

### Grundtvig's "Sub-Creation Theory"

Another crucial feature of Grundtvig's theology were his views regarding the nature of human creativity that led to mythology. Mythology was a result of Man's poetic ability, which itself was the Image of God in Man. Man the creator was both creation and image of God the Creator. Even after the Fall, Man has retained a remnant of Fantasy (*indbildningskraft Fantasi*) which is the form in which the poetic ability manifests itself, and thereby the possibility to glimpse at the higher truth about Man and God; but now the ability can also be put to ill uses.<sup>19</sup> Without God's help, Fallen Man can no longer distinguish between Truth and Lie.

The function of the poetic ability is not to *invent*, but to *uncover*: It is derivative, albeit not passive. The poet (*skjalden*) is "the Lord's fellow worker" (*Herrens medarbejder*) (Rønning, 1907-14, IV, 2, p. 162). When correctly used, the poetic ability will of its nature express truth, whether the user intends it or not (Grell, 1980, pp. 49 ff.).<sup>20</sup> And the ability should be used. Only by "imitating [God's] Creation" (*efterligne Skabelsen*, a possible translation might be "sub-creating") can Man realize the Image of God that he carries within him and become aware of his own true nature (Grundtvig, 1983, p. 79).<sup>21</sup>

Like God, also for Man the instrument of creation is the word. The fundamental importance of "Man's word" (*Menneskeordet*) is constantly emphasized in Grundtvig's writings. It is an integral part of the Image of God in Man, and the sole channel of knowledge about Man's relationship to his Maker.<sup>22</sup> The medium of the poetic ability, and the symbol of Man's lordship over the rest of creation, is language (Grell, 1980, p. 116). Man's word echoes God's word in that it re-creates in images the things which God's word has made reality. Man is created; therefore his word, his "image-language", contains an image of God's Word of Creation (Grell, 1980, pp. 128, 154, Grell, 1988, p. 96, Grell, 1980 pp. 66, 71).

### Tolkien and Grundtvig: Influence or Coincidence?

Grundtvig's thoughts on mythology, Christianity and human creativity show striking similarities to Tolkien's "sub-creation theory". Tolkien, too, drew a sharp distinction between religion and mythology, which he found "almost devoid of religious significance" (Tolkien, 1988, p. 27, Tolkien, 1977a, p. 20, and cf. p. 22). Tolkien, too, regarded non-Christian mythologies not necessarily as lies, but as humanity's attempts – reading God's creation, but without the revelation in Christ – at explaining man's position in the world. They both rejected the view that myths were to be understood primarily as primitive attempts at explaining natural or social phenomena (Garde, 1897, p. 6. Cf. Tolkien, 1988, pp. 25-27). Both men were firm believers in Natural Theology, but, as pointed out in Tolkien's case by Colin Duriez, they held it to be founded on Fantasy (i.e. imagination) rather than Reason (Duriez, 1992, p. 186, cf. p. 61). For both men, Christianity was the true mythology, the one fusion of History and Myth, throwing reflections and shadows backwards and forwards in time. Both men believed that Man, made in the image and likeness of a Maker, fulfilled that Maker's will by creating with words, thereby helping him to gain a better understanding of his existence and uncovering underlying truth. Both men referred to Man's gift of Fantasy as his symbol of kingship over the rest of creation. Both agreed that the gift was used most effectively when describing those things that could not be directly observed in the primary world.<sup>23</sup> Both believed that language and myth were inextricably entwined. And both men, finally, hoped that the fruits of Man's creativity would be redeemed in God's new creation.<sup>24</sup>

In short, all the central elements in Tolkien's sub-creation theory can be found in Grundtvig and are expressed in very similar terms. The point is not that these elements, taken singly, are so original. We have seen that several of them are

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*Historie, at disse vel stred imod al Afguds-Dyrkelse, men at de godt lot sig rime sammen med deres hedenske Forestillinger om Livets Kræfter Kamp og Udvikling i Tidens Løb, saa de to Ting var som Alvor og Gammen, der altid i Norden kan godt sammen . . .* " Cf. Thaning, 1963, p. 142 and Thaning, 1983, p. 95.

<sup>19</sup> See Grell, 1980, pp. 41-44, cf. pp. 74 ff. See also Grundtvig, 1832, pp. 70 ff.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Grundtvig, 1904-1909, VIII, p. 351, from "Skjalde-Blik paa Danmarks Stjerne" (1840): "Billed-Sproget er dobbelt Sandt,/Og tænker end Thrym, det er kun Tant,/Thor siger: løft kun Sløret!" see also Thaning, 1963, p. 451.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Aronson, 1960, p. 190.

<sup>22</sup> Grell, 1980, pp. 59-63. Cf. Grell, 1988, p. 93; Aronson, 1980, p. 206; and Thaning, 1963, pp. 675 ff. Grundtvig believed that only one's cradle tongue could function as "image-language" and convey adequately the truth about God and Man. The position of the straightforward popular language was therefore a measure of the cultural status of the people/nation. An important point in this connection is that because this language, *Modersmaalet*, was inherited from Pagan forebears and shaped by their imagination, its "natural, Pagan Character and Form" must necessarily be used even when conveying Christianity: Thaning, 1983, p. 95, cf. Aronson, 1980, p. 178. See also Haarder, 1983, pp. 76 ff. Aronson has pointed out that Grundtvig did not derive his idea of the Image of God in Man only from Genesis, but also from the nature of language: Aronson, 1980, pp. 38, 13, cf. p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> Tolkien, 1988, pp. 24 ff; Grundtvig, 1983, p. 158: ". . . det er langt fra, at vort Ord er stærkest, naar det nærvner og beskriver hvad Man kan see for sine Øine og tage paa med Hænder, men det er netop i sin Kraft, naar det udtrykker det usynlige og Ubegriplige, som lever i os, eller svæver over os, og skaber saaledes en heel usynlig Verden, som vi Mennesker har for os selv og see kun Skygger og Billeder af i den synlige Verden" ["it is not by far so, that our word is strongest when it mentions and describes what a man may see with his eyes and touch with his hands; it is precisely when it gives expression to the invisible and unfathomable that it gains its full power, [the things] that live in us, or hover above us, and creates in this fashion a whole invisible world, which we humans have to ourselves [as opposed to animals – NIA] and of which we can only see shadows and images in the visible world"].

<sup>24</sup> Grell, 1980, p. 67, cf. Aronson, 1960, p. 50; Tolkien, 1988, p. 66. Grundtvig believed that there was room for development and improvement even in Paradise (i.e. Man can contribute): Aronson, 1960, p. 48.

not. The point is, rather, that almost exactly the same elements were offered in defence by these two men who came from very different backgrounds but were faced with very much the same kind of problem: how to reconcile mythology, including self-made mythology, with orthodox Christianity; and: why Christians should spend time on mythologies and fairy-stories at all.<sup>25</sup>

Our next question must obviously be: was Tolkien directly influenced by Grundtvig? Had Tolkien even heard about Grundtvig, the untranslated Danish theologian?

The last question is easy enough. Tolkien must have had some knowledge of Grundtvig because Grundtvig was one of the pioneers in Tolkien's professional field: Anglo-Saxon studies. When Thorkelin published the first modern edition of *Beowulf* in Copenhagen in 1815, it was Grundtvig who pointed out the very serious deficiencies in it. With his *Bjovulf's Drape* in 1820, Grundtvig was himself the first to translate the poem into a modern language, and was also "the first to understand the story of *Beowulf*", according to one authority (Tinker, 1974, p. 23. Cf. Chambers, 1932, p. 515).. The discovery that king Hygelac in the poem was actually identical with a historical person mentioned by Martin of Tours – to Tolkien one of the "most important facts . . . that research has discovered" – was Grundtvig's.<sup>26</sup> On the basis of his intimate knowledge of Norse mythology he was also the first to trace the links between the Eddic and the Anglo-Saxon literatures.<sup>27</sup> In 1829-31, at a time when there was almost no interest in Anglo-Saxon in Britain, Grundtvig made repeated visits to British libraries, collections and places of learning to study the old manuscripts – and also to try and rouse the British scholars of the day from their indifference regarding their Old English heritage. In this he was successful – so much so that he eventually discovered to his sorrow that not all his British colleagues welcomed what they regarded as foreign interference.<sup>28</sup>

Professionally, Tolkien probably knew Grundtvig best as a critic and editor of *Beowulf*. Grundtvig's name figures in most of the standard works on *Beowulf* that Tolkien used, and, as Tom Shippey has pointed out, it is likely that Grundtvig is present in Tolkien's famous 1936 lecture on *Beowulf* as one of the very old voices, not as far out as some of the newer ones, crying that the poem was a "mythical allegory" (Tolkien, 1977a, p. 5, cf. Shippey, 1982, p. 223). What Grundtvig had to say about *Beowulf* was in fact very

similar to what Tolkien stated in his lecture. Grundtvig regarded *Beowulf* as a portrayal of "Man's struggle against the Force of Darkness" (*Menneske-Kampen mod hin Mørkets Magt*), possessing a measure of "poetic truth" (1983, p. 96); Tolkien's words were "man at war with the hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time" (1977a, p. 16).<sup>29</sup> They agreed on the nature of the fundamental conflict: the monsters were the enemies of both God and Man, and should be fought even without hope of final victory.

*Beowulf*, which occupied both Tolkien and Grundtvig intensely, is thus the most certain link between them. Intriguingly, Tolkien used part of his lecture to argue that the *Beowulf* poet confronted exactly the same problem as he himself (and Grundtvig) struggled with: "shall we or shall we not consign the heathen ancestors to perdition? [. . .] *Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?*" He then gave his (and Grundtvig's) answer at once, echoing his poem "Mythopoeia" (then unpublished): "The author of *Beowulf* showed forth the permanent value of that *pietas* which treasures the memory of man's struggles in the dark past, man fallen and not yet saved, disgraced but not dethroned" (Tolkien, 1977a, p. 22).<sup>30</sup>

Whether Tolkien knew other parts of Grundtvig's vast and wide-spanning literary production is more difficult to decide. There are many reasons why Grundtvig would have appealed to Tolkien, other than their burning love of the same traditions. Their basic outlook was in many respects very similar. Tolkien loved the "noble northern spirit" and felt a measure of distaste for the East. Grundtvig regarded the Anglo-Saxon/Scandinavian culture as a high civilization in its own right. It was neither peripheral, barbaric, nor a mere derivation of more southerly or easterly cultures (inferior except for the Hebrews and the Greeks). Where Tolkien talked about the "fundamentally similar heroic temper of ancient England and Scandinavia" (Tolkien, 1977a, p. 19. Cf. p. 23), Grundtvig never tired of pointing out that the ancient northern civilization had comprised Scandinavia and England both; in his *Høinorden*, England was always enthusiastically included. For both men, England was the blessed land where the northern spirit had first been "sanctified and Christianized".<sup>31</sup> Grundtvig's hope for the future of civilization was that the "Heroic Spirit of the North" would rise anew when England and Scandinavia discovered their ancient bonds and joined forces once again – not politically,

<sup>25</sup> Of course, this is not to say that there are no significant differences between Grundtvig's and Tolkien's theories. For instance, Grundtvig lack's Tolkien's "Eucatastrophe" (but on the other hand often points to the way the real "Eucatastrophe", the Gospel, is reflected in the imagination).

<sup>26</sup> Tolkien, 1977a, p. 3. Grundtvig's influence in the field of Anglo-Saxon studies is explored in detail in Rønning, 1885. See also Garde, 1897, and Haarder, 1983.

<sup>27</sup> Garde, 1897, pp. 18, 21. Grundtvig believed that the Eddic poems had at one stage survived only in Anglo-Saxon form.

<sup>28</sup> In 1830 he was asked by a London firm of booksellers to edit a series of editions of Anglo-Saxon works, starting with *Beowulf*, only to see the idea taken over by the British scholar Benjamin Thorpe, who launched a competing series with the backing of the Antiquarian Society. Because of this, Grundtvig's series never progressed beyond the planning stage.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Tolkien, 1977a, p. 25; "Man alien in a hostile world, engaged in a struggle which he cannot win while the world lasts". On further similarities (and differences!) between Tolkien's and Grundtvig's interpretations and evaluations of the poem see also Haarder, 1975, chapter 4 (including many relevant quotes from Grundtvig); and Haarder, 1983, pp. 74 ff.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. p. 27. The parallel to "Mythopoeia" is not only to stanza 5, but also to 6-11.

<sup>31</sup> Tolkien's words in Tolkien, 1981, p. 56, cf. Grundtvig, 1832, pp. 107 ff.

but culturally.<sup>32</sup> (One of the many places where this wish was formulated was in an Anglo-Saxon poem introducing Grundtvig's 1861 *Beowulf* edition, which Tolkien had no doubt read.) Like Tolkien, Grundtvig lamented the fact that the English had lost sight of their mythological and cultural roots. As *The History of Middle-earth* has shown, Tolkien, too, was intensely interested in uncovering and revitalizing those roots. He may have seen Grundtvig's 1831 prospectus to a proposed "Anglo-Saxon library", written in English and proclaiming, with characteristic zeal, the immense historical significance of Anglo-Saxon civilization and the concomitant importance of studying it.

But for Tolkien to have assimilated more than broad outlines of Grundtvig's thought he would have had to either have read him in Danish or received his information indirectly.

The last-mentioned possibility is not so far-fetched as it might seem. Grundtvig's writings were read by many German scholars, and constantly reviewed and referred to in German philological, historical and theological literature. When he visited Cambridge in 1831, Grundtvig found that his name was well known through German academic journals (Rønning, 1885, V, pp. 138, 144). Tolkien certainly kept up with the most important German-language publications in his field, and may, if his reading was wide enough, have become acquainted with the main features of Grundtvig's way of thought through them. And of course Tolkien may have learnt about Grundtvig from colleagues who specialized in fields which required familiarity with Scandinavian academic literature.<sup>33</sup>

If Tolkien's sub-creation theory was directly influenced by Grundtvig, it is nevertheless more probable that he read him in the original. The book he is most likely to have been influenced by is Grundtvig's central work on mythology, *Nordens Mythologi* from 1832, re-issued in 1870 (and not to be confused with a book of the same title published in 1808). Although they are found in different places, this book contains most of the elements of what I have called Grundtvig's "sub-creation theory". It also discusses why myths are so vitally important for a people, and the "universal-historic" value of North-West-European traditions. But could Tolkien read modern Danish? This is a debatable point. Unlike some of his colleagues, Tolkien very seldom referred to Scandinavian-language academic literature in his published works, which may be an indication that he did not read much of it.<sup>34</sup> It is not possible to deduce any intimate knowledge of modern Scandinavian from the few references he does make. They do show, however, that he could penetrate a text if he really wanted to. This is borne out by Tolkien's controversy with the Swedish translator of *The Lord of the Rings*: Tolkien wrote, in 1957, that his knowledge of Swedish was "inadequate", but he was nevertheless able, with the aid of a dictionary and motivated by strong personal interest, to make his way through some pages of text in that language.<sup>35</sup> He may of course have had a better command of it in earlier years. There are only five Scandinavian-language books among the 320 or so Tolkien donated to the Bodleian Library and the British Faculty Library in Oxford, and they do not change the picture.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> See for instance Grundtvig, 1832, pp. 3 ff., Rønning, 1885, V, p. 183, Bang, 1932.

<sup>33</sup> For instance, both R.W. Chambers, author of a classic *Beowulf* introduction, and Fr. Klaeber, the man behind the standard *Beowulf* text edition, were familiar with even rather obscure articles in Scandinavian languages, and knew Grundtvig not only as a *Beowulf* scholar, but also as the author of *Nordens Mythologi* (1832).

The possibility that some account of the learned Dane with the grand and stimulating views survived somehow in academic circles in Britain cannot be entirely ruled out. Grundtvig travelled to England four times, in 1829, 1830, 1831 and 1843. He talked to many of the most distinguished scholars in England and was invited to both Oxford and Cambridge for extended stays. The visits may have left marks of some sort in annual reports, correspondence, lecture notes, publications with limited circulation or the like. However, it is of course unlikely that any such accounts could, on their own, have given more than the vaguest intimations of Grundtvig's interests and philosophy.

<sup>34</sup> A cursory check shows that he referred to Torp's *Nynorsk etymologisk ordbog* and to Finnur Jónsson's *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning* (1912-15) in "Sigelwara Land" (Tolkien, 1932 and 1934). Jónsson's book pops up again in *Finn and Hengest: The Fragment and the Episode* (edited by Alan Bliss on the basis of Tolkien's lecture notes, 1982). In his chapters on "Philology: General Works" in *The Year's Work in English Studies 1923-25* (1924, 26 & 27), Tolkien mentions an unexamined Swedish-language book in 1923 (p. 33) and accords Professor Otto Jespersen's *Menneskehed, Nasjon, og Individ i Sproget* (1925) high marks, but only eight lines, in 1925. According to the back cover of Jespersen's book, the work was also available in English, but Tolkien does not seem to have exerted himself to get hold of that edition, which would seem to indicate that he could read Jespersen's Danish. Cf. Shippey, 1982, p. 223. – The fact that Tolkien, when referring to Norwegian fairy-tales in "On Fairy-Stories", used Dasent's *Popular Tales from the Norse* rather than Asbjørnsen and Moe's landmark collection of Norwegian fairy-tales may be an indication that he did not easily read modern Norwegian. Admittedly, Tolkien also quoted from Dasent's introduction.

There are some scraps of Danish in the privately published *Songs for the Philologists* (Tolkien, Gordon *et al*, 1936), to which Tolkien was the major contributor. Bodil Kragh (1985, p. 120, note 9) thinks that these were written by Tolkien, but according to Tolkien's own notes to the collection this is not correct.

<sup>35</sup> Tolkien, 1981, p. 263, cf. pp. 304-7. Cf. Ohlmarks, 1978, p. 23: "Han trodde sig forstå svenskan flytande, men saknade i själva verket även mycket elementära begrepp om språket . . .", and p. 143: "Han kunde möjligen begripa huvudinnehållet i en enklare svensk text". Ohlmarks' book is generally unreliable, however.

<sup>36</sup> According to lists given to me in June 1992 by Anders Stenström. Two of them are relatively uninteresting in that they mainly contain texts in ancient languages. Two others, *Færøske Folkesagn og æventyr* by Jakob Jakobsen (ed.) (1898-1901) and *Færøiske Qvæder om Sigurd Fofnersbane og hans Æt* by Hans Christian Lyngbye (ed.) (1822) are also text editions, but of greater interest to us because the Faeroese language in them can be said to be a kind of intermediate stage between South-West Norwegian and Icelandic, but is much closer to modern Scandinavian languages than the latter. If Tolkien could read Faeroese fluently, Grundtvig's Danish would probably not have daunted him.

On the basis of the striking parallels between the two, it seems probable that Grundtvig's philosophy was one of the major sources Tolkien drew on when forming his "sub-creation theory". Polygenesis – that the two men, both deeply religious and faced with similar dilemmas, should independently have formed very similar theories – cannot so far be categorically ruled out, but it does seem to me to be less likely.

But if Grundtvig was so important, would not Tolkien have mentioned him explicitly somewhere? Not necessarily. In writing about "Tolkien's Sources: the True Tradition" (mentioning Grundtvig!), Tom Shippey has made the point that Tolkien's sources of inspiration are not always evident in his published writings, including his letters. For instance, it is indisputable that Tolkien, when writing "On Fairy-Stories", was deeply influenced by Owen Barfield's *Poetic*

*Diction*. Yet we would never guess this solely from what Tolkien published.

Tracing Tolkien's sources is a risky business. He himself had no great sympathy for those who, when savouring a plate of soup, wished to examine the bones of the ox out of which it had been boiled. Part of what he meant was that tracking down the sources and influences on a story does not necessarily help you appreciate the story as such – a position very few of his critics have adopted. To a certain extent, the same is applicable to non-fiction, such as "On Fairy-Stories". Tolkien's theory should stand or fall on its own merits. I believe, nevertheless, that further study of the relationship between Grundtvig and Tolkien may enable us to reach a deeper understanding not only of what Tolkien did and did not mean with his "sub-creation theory", but of the character of his *legendarium* as well.

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