

## *Bildung to dannelse: A historical analysis of an educational concept in motion from Fichte's "Addresses to the German Nation" to Grundtvig's "Nordic Mythology," 1808 – 1832*

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### Abstract

This conceptual research analyses the historical development of the German concept of *Bildung* to the Danish *dannelse*. **The starting point is J.G. Fichte's 1808 "Addresses to the German Nation,"** in which *Bildung* is analyzed as a key concept. The paper illustrates the influence Fichte had on N.F.S. Grundtvig, the "father of modern Denmark," with important adaptations based on English liberties and Nordic mythology. Grundtvig's *dannelse* is then analyzed based on his 1832 "milestone" work, "Nordic Mythology." The paper finds that *Bildung* and *dannelse* can be considered parallel concepts of similarity in their shared emphasis on the mother-tongue as a "living language," and focus on social cohesion. However, *Bildung* and *dannelse* can also be characterized as concepts of difference, in that: 1) *dannelse* popularized *Bildung*, meaning that it was not just for the academic bourgeoisie, but the entire "folk"; 2) freedom of expression is fundamental to *dannelse*, in contrast to the stability of will and moral order in *Bildung*; 3) in *dannelse*, national unity is expanded to a wider circle of belonging, the whole of humankind; 4) Nordic mythology is a social cohesive in *dannelse*, to contrast **Fichte's more rational** conception of *Bildung*. Written by a British author for an English-speaking readership, this research does not feign to be more than a prefatory glance at two rich and complex concepts. However, in shedding light on the historical development of *Bildung* to *dannelse*, it aspires to edge readers closer toward a shared conceptual understanding or, more aptly, to better understand misunderstandings.

### Keywords

*Bildung, dannelse, Fichte, Grundtvig, Addresses to the German Nation, Nordic Mythology*

### Introduction

Educational concepts of one country, in one language, inevitably differ to those in others. Yet they often get translated as one and the same. *Bildung* and *dannelse* illustrate this point: in German, the Danish *dannelse* is *Bildung*; in Danish, the German *Bildung* is *dannelse*; and in English, both *Bildung* and *dannelse* are often translated as "education." However, *Bildung* and *dannelse* should not be seen as one and the same; to do so would belie their historical and cultural differences. "Education" in English does not mean the same as *Bildung* in German or *dannelse* in Danish. How can one untangle oneself from such untranslatability? Herein lies the call for what Biesta (2012) terms "academic

**bilingualism in education" (p. 22). Academic bilingualism does not infer simply translating words from one language to another, but rather "[...] an intricate semantic labour across systems and frames of meaning" (Friesen, 2021, p. 348).** The aim of this paper is to conduct such a semantic effort, taking the concepts of *Bildung* and *dannelse* as the foci of analysis. In doing so, it seeks to chart a course toward a shared understanding or, more aptly, a better understanding of misunderstandings.

Advocates of *Bildung* are often unabashedly optimistic about its conceptual potential, with Horlacher (2016) even suggesting **that "it has the power to save the world" (p. 127).** The more terms such as "learning outcomes,"

“employability,” and “human capital” are deployed in discussions in education studies, the brighter too begins to glow the opposite pole: *Bildung* as something sacrosanct, resistant to the logic of utility. *Bildung* is also increasingly being adopted untranslated in English-speaking academia (Horlacher, 2016). This seems sensible, given its rich historical and cultural heritage and lack of a suitable English translation (at times it is “education,” at others “formation” or “cultivation”). However, Miller (2021) notes the challenge of defining *Bildung* even when untranslated: burdening *Bildung* with the philosophical thought of every German academic over the past 250 years would make it incongruent and void of conceptual integrity.

This research focuses on Johann **Gottfried Fichte’s (1762 – 1814)** conception of *Bildung*. Fichte spoke and wrote widely about a whole host of topics, but his conception of *Bildung* is particularly important given the impact he had on the Prussian education system **(Turnbull, 1922). That said, Fichte’s name is also closely associated with “more virulent forms of German nationalism,”** in particular with the National Socialists around World War II (Breazdale, 2016, p. 11). For some, his works are therefore viewed as “toxic material”; this paper argues in line with Breazdale (2016) that it **would be erroneous to view Fichte’s works as** such, and that worthy educational insights can be found in his writing.

Fichte and Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783 – 1872), a Danish pastor, poet, and politician, share many commonalities, strongest of all their devotion to educating their respective nations (Øhrgaard, 2015). To non-Danes, Grundtvig is likely unknown; to Danes,

**he is a legend, “[...] rightly regarded as the individual who has had the greatest importance in the formation of the Danish nation”** (Korsgaard, 2015, p. 192). The impact of Grundtvig – and the Grundtvigians who followed him – is so profound in Denmark that he is a fundamental and indisputable reference point in Danish history (Hall & Korsgaard, 2015). Grundtvig spoke widely on topics such as religion, the monarchy and history (Bønding, 2021). He is perhaps best known for his philosophy and influence on Danish and more broadly Nordic education,<sup>1</sup> particularly the formation of folk high schools (Siljander, 1984).

The concept of *dannelse* underpins **Grundtvig’s ideas for folk high schools and can** be seen as one of his most important contributions to Danish and Nordic education (Siljander, 1984). A comprehension of *dannelse* is thus needed to appreciate Nordic education both historically and as it manifests itself today (there are still 70 folk high schools in Denmark and 77 in Norway, for example). This paper argues that this has relevance not just for those engaged in Nordic education, but also from a comparative perspective to an English-speaking readership.

The paper is structured to answer the overarching research question, how can *Bildung* and *dannelse* be considered concepts of similarity and difference, and how can these similarities and differences be explicated? Following the **methodology, it analyses Fichte’s (1808/ 1922) conception of *Bildung* based on his “Addresses to the German Nation.”**<sup>2</sup> The next section documents the means of travel, in other words, how this conception of *Bildung* became *dannelse*. Next, the paper analyzes Grundtvig’s

<sup>1</sup> Andersen & Björkman (2017) illustrate the point well that **Grundtvig’s** influence extends beyond Denmark. Whilst his ideas are most closely associated with Denmark, they also

spread to the other Nordic countries, both theoretically and practically.

<sup>2</sup> For brevity, references of this work will subsequently be simplified to “Addresses.”

(1832/ 2011) conception of *dannelse* based on his “Nordic Mythology,”<sup>3</sup> concurrently illustrating conceptual synergies and differences with Fichte’s (1808/ 1922) *Bildung*. The paper concludes by reiterating the need for academic bilingualism to frame *Bildung* and *dannelse* as parallel concepts of both similarity and difference.

### Methodology

This section describes the methodology, more categorically: the choice of material, consideration of its structure as a comparative analysis, suitability of the versions of the texts used, approach taken to provide conceptual clarity, and a reflection on limitations. Whilst much less has been written about conceptual research as supposed to empirical in research methods literature, that does not mean it is without process (Jaakkola, 2020). What follows is an attempt to delineate this process to the reader. The intentions of this are two-fold: first, to convince the reader of the rigor of the research undertaken; second, to facilitate **readers’ own research enquiries if they wish to pursue further any of the points made.**

#### *Choice of material*

**Fichte’s (1808/ 1922) “Addresses to the German Nation”** is a suitable starting point of analysis. It has been described as a “prophetic” work, which heralded and explained a great transition toward nationality taking place in Europe (Turnbull, 1922, p. xxi). For Fichte,

rebuilding the Prussian state after its defeat to Napoleon is to be premised on education, which **is the “only true foundation of national prosperity”** (Turnbull, 1923, p. 184). In the past, education has been futile, but Fichte imagines a new system of education which will be applied to all without exception: a new national education (Turnbull, 1923). Large parts of the “Addresses” are devoted to education and, specifically, *Bildung*: the terms *Bildung* and its verb form *bilden* are used a total of 203 times within the work. To gain insight into the concept of *Bildung*, it is therefore a text worthy of consideration.<sup>4</sup>

**Grundtvig’s (1832/ 2011) “Nordic mythology”** is a suitable point to conclude the analysis. It is described as Grundtvig’s most influential work and represents a “milestone” in which he started to engage more heavily in secular affairs and specifically, to write more about education (Broadbridge et al., 2011).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the ideas contained within “Nordic mythology” **form the foundation of Grundtvig’s** conception of the “folk high school” (Siljander, 1984).<sup>6</sup> “Folk high schools” represent an integral part of Nordic cultural heritage and can be seen as central to the education system that can explain the “Nordic secret” (how the Nordics transformed from economically poor agrarian countries in the nineteenth century to some of the wealthiest and happiest in the world today).<sup>7</sup> In “Nordic mythology,” Grundtvig introduces the term *dannelse*, which is used 23 times in the work; in contrast, many of his earlier works

<sup>3</sup> The full title of this work is ‘Nordic Mythology or Symbolic Language as Developed and Illuminated Historically and Poetically.’

<sup>4</sup> Insight could be further enhanced by relating Fichte’s conception of *Bildung* in the “Addresses” to his wider philosophical work, particularly the “*Wissenschaftslehre*.”

<sup>5</sup> There has been significant discussion and attempts to periodize Grundtvig’s work. Whilst Thaning’s (1963) claim that 1832 constituted a radical break in his thought has been widely criticized (e.g., Thyssen, 1983; Auken, 2005). Bønding

(2021) argues that the consensus view is that it nevertheless marked a “milestone.”

<sup>6</sup> “Folk high schools” (*folkehøgskole*) are often called the world’s freest schools: they have no grades, no rigid curriculum, and no exams. They are boarding schools, with students mostly aged between 18 and 25 years. Further information can be accessed here: <https://danishfolkhighschools.com/about-folk-high-schools/what-is-a-folk-high-school/>.

<sup>7</sup> Andersen & Björkman (2017) make a compelling claim to support this hypothesis.

make no use of this term at all.<sup>8</sup> Although *dannelse* is subsequently further developed, particularly in its practical manifestation through folk high schools, “Nordic mythology” remains the seminal work (Siljander, 1984). It is therefrom an appropriate text for consideration.

### *Comparative analysis*

This historical analysis is comparative in that it aims to highlight similarities and differences between *Bildung* and *dannelse*. The criteria for comparison arise from the initial close reading and corresponding text analysis of **Fichte’s “Addresses,”** considered from an educationalist perspective. In other words, highlighted key tenets of *Bildung* frame the subsequent analysis of *dannelse*. *Bildung* thus serves as the starting point and catalyst for subsequent analysis of the historical conditions that give *dannelse* its intelligibility. Such a framing inevitably implies a one-way flow of influence, from Fichte to Grundtvig, *Bildung* to *dannelse*. This is, of course, overly simplistic (the prevailing cultures within which *Bildung* and *dannelse* were conceptualized might rather be seen as dynamic, networked, and interdependent), but serves as a helpful heuristic to build the argument succinctly.

### *Suitability of text versions used*

**Fichte’s “Addresses”** were originally delivered as 14 separate speeches in Berlin during the winter 1807 – 1808, with the full text version published after in May 1808 (Breazdale, 2016). This paper bases the text analysis on **Jones & Turnbull’s (1922) translation.** Until recently, it remained unchallenged for almost 100 years as the English version of the text par excellence (Moore, 2008). The fact that no other

English translations were attempted since its publication in this time is testament to the quality and credibility of the work. As Jones & Turnbull (1922) themselves note, the work aims to keep as closely as possible to the original German, whilst also being intelligible to the English-speaking reader.

The version used of **Grundtvig’s “Nordic Mythology”** is a translated extract by Broadbridge (2011) totaling 33 pages (pp. 43 – 75). The full Danish version publicly available on *grundtvigsvaerker.dk*<sup>9</sup> is much longer (334 pages), but the extract chosen represents a suitable reduction of content, selected intentionally by Broadbridge and colleagues (widely respected Grundtvig scholars) to introduce readers to the work. It is also the section of the text where Grundtvig discusses *dannelse* most directly (*dannelse* is used 19 times in this extract out of 23 uses in the text as a whole).

### *Conceptual clarity*

The paper provides conceptual clarity by cross-referencing the translated English texts to the untranslated works of Fichte (1808/ 1881) and Grundtvig (1832/ 2020). The purpose of this is to identify where the concepts of focus, *Bildung* and *dannelse*, are used in the German and Danish versions of the texts. Both texts deal with numerous interrelated concepts, of which the boundaries are often ill-defined. For example, if one were to only read the English translation, it would be difficult to identify where Fichte (1808/ 1922) refers to *Bildung*, as supposed to the associated German concept *Erziehung*, since both are at times translated as “education.” Similarly, in Grundtvig (1832/ 2011), “education” is used to express *dannelse*,

<sup>8</sup> This was identified based on a key term search of *dannelse* in “Nordic Mythology” and a selection of earlier works available at: <http://www.xn--grundtvigsvrker-7lb.dk/>

<sup>9</sup> This site serves as an invaluable trove of works by Grundtvig. Every one of his known works is available here, searchable, and complete with background information.

but also the Danish term *oplysning* (which is also sometimes translated as “enlightenment”). By cross-referencing the translated versions with the originals in German and Danish, the paper aspires to convince readers that *Bildung* and *dannelse* are indeed the concepts of focus in the passages analyzed. As a result, *Bildung* and *dannelse* are left untranslated in the quoted passages to reflect this use in the original versions.

### *Limitations*

This research relies on a translation of the original work for both chosen texts, and, as such, the research represents an interpretation of interpretations. The research presents an **interpretation based on the translators’ works** (and not directly of Fichte or Grundtvig). That said, this should not undermine the credibility of the research. On the contrary, the challenge of understanding the texts in their original form has been noted by the translators. Regarding Fichte (1808/ 1922), Turnbull (1923) remarks **that “some parts are quite obscure and present great difficulties to the translator and to the general reader, while there are a few passages which seem to defy almost all effort at translation and interpretation” (p. 195).** Regarding Grundtvig (1832/ 2011), Broadbridge (2011) notes the difficulty in understanding, **since “almost all of his prose sentences are between 100-150 words, his syntax is convoluted, his language often obscure, and his numerous references go largely unheeded nowadays” (p. 8). As an English-speaker relatively new to the works of Fichte and Grundtvig, it is thus advantageous to read the texts through the lens’ of experts, which will**

hopefully have enhanced the lucidity of understanding presented.

Moreover, critical engagements with practical translations of the theoretical concepts in focus, *Bildung* and *dannelse*, are beyond the scope of this research. For example, this paper **does not conduct a critical analysis of Fichte’s** conception of *Bildung* in the “Addresses” in relation to its subsequent use/ appropriation by the National Socialists in 20th century Germany. Likewise, the paper does not analyze how **Grundtvig’s *dannelse*** has manifested itself in practice, for example in folk high schools, or engage with appraisals of whether its conceptual aims have been achieved. Such critical research would no doubt prove worthy academic endeavors.

### **Fichte’s *Bildung* in “Addresses to the German Nation”**

The analysis below draws on the 2nd (pp. 19 – 35) and 4th (pp. 52 – 71) of Fichte’s (1808/ 1922) “Addresses.”<sup>10</sup> In the 2nd of the 14 addresses, Fichte (1808/ 1922) proposes a remedy for the German nation (in the wake of **defeat to Napoleon**): **“an absolutely new system of German education” (p. 19). In the 4th address,** Fichte focuses on the differences he sees between Germans and other peoples. The tenets highlighted below are not an exhaustive analysis of the key ideas contained within the “Addresses.” They are instead selected as a suitable reduction to ground the reader with a preliminary understanding of their content, specifically in relation to *Bildung*.

<sup>10</sup> References to this text are numerous in the following pages. As such, citations are listed with just the page number in parentheses wherever such a reference is made.

### *Stable, moral will*

A key tenet of the *Bildung* proposed by Fichte (1808/ 1922) is the development of a stable, moral will. This is to be contrasted to the **“impotence and futility” of the previous education system, which developed the free will of the pupil; “on the other hand, the new education must consist essentially in this, that it completely destroys freedom of will in the soil in which it undertakes to cultivate [...]” (p. 20). Freedom of will leads to students “[...] hesitating undecided between good and evil [...]” (p. 20). If students are left to their own free will, there can be no guarantee that they will pursue a morally desirable course of action. This would not constitute *Bildung*, but instead what Fichte terms an “aimless game” (p. 21). What would be the point of education if there can be no guarantee that students will subsequently pursue a morally desirable course of action?**

A stable will should instead produce a **resolute personality: “All *Bildung* aims at producing a stable, settled and steadfast character [...]” (p. 20). Someone with a stable will does not fluctuate between good and evil whimsically, but instead “wills what he wills forever” (p. 21). Developing such a stable will should not be left to chance, but is rather an intentional practice, reliable, and infallible: “*Bildung* for manhood must be taken for the influence of this mysterious and incalculable force and put under the direction of a deliberate art” (p. 22). Herein lies the task for educators, to help students foster *Bildung* in a conscious, considered practice.**

Furthermore, this stable will should be morally good to ensure the continued existence **of the German nation: “we are, therefore, compelled by necessity to wish to mould men who are inwardly and fundamentally good, since it is through such men alone that the German**

**nation can continue to exist [...]” (p. 23). This leaves no room for selfishness or sensuous self-satisfaction, since one should always be occupied with love of what is morally desirable. As Fichte puts it, “This method of mental *Bildung* is, therefore, the immediate preparation for the moral; it completely destroys the root of immortality by never allowing sensuous enjoyment to become the motive” (p. 31). The reason for this is to replace a love of self with a love of what is morally good.**

### *Creating an image of moral order*

*Bildung* is not solely confined to internal development; the ultimate objective is action in accordance with the will to improve society. The stable, moral will to be developed within students needs to move from internal to **external, otherwise society “would at best train excellent men of learning” (p. 31). As Fichte puts it,**

**“[...] this free activity of the mind is developed with the intention that by it the pupil may voluntarily create the image of a moral order of life that actually exists, may lay hold of this image with the love that is also already developed in him, and be spurred on by this love to realise it actually in and by his life” (p. 32).**

**The aim of Fichte’s (1808/ 1922) *Bildung* is to create a harmonious society according to the moral will of its citizens. One needs both inward and outward formation: inward perfection of a stable, moral will, but also outward action to improve society. Mental activity is insufficient if it does not also lead to individuals improving society in the image of this moral will, in accordance with the law of reason.**

**This is the “higher question” Fichte’s *Bildung* seeks to respond to: whether the**

student is filled with such love for moral order that they work to promote it in society (p. 32). **This will be evident in people's deeds, through their actions in society. The image of social order stimulated in the pupil's mind should be created within the community that the student lives. If a student has fostered such a *Bildung*, "he will be inwardly compelled, therefore, to fashion this order for himself bit for bit, just as it is actually sketched out for him" (p. 33). The development of a stable, moral will should compel the student to improve society in the image of such a will.**

Creating an image of moral order in **society requires abstention: "every individual has continually to abstain, for the sake of the community, from much that he could do without hesitation if he were alone" (p. 33). One cannot act as if they alone matter, if one is to contribute to a morally harmonious society. However, abstention is not enough on its own: one must "[...] also work and act, for the sake of the community" (p. 34). *Bildung* requires actively contributing to the formation of the morally good society too. Physical labor, including farming and trades, are given as examples here. Such work should be voluntary, and free of reward, "[...] for the attitude of mind and prevailing in the community is that it is just everyone's duty to act thus; but he alone enjoys the pleasure of acting and working for the community [...]" (p. 35). Fichte envisages that such work will happen first in an idealized environment (a school), before going out in the "real world."**

#### *German as "living language"*

Fichte is clear that this conception of *Bildung* **is intended for Germans: "[...] the means of educating [*Bildungsmittel*] a new race of men, which is being put forward in these addresses, must first be applied by Germans to Germans, and that it concerns our nation in a**

**special and peculiar" (p. 52). For the present-day reader, this might sound alarming, and seemingly to strike an overly nationalistic tone, but the historical context must be heeded. Fichte is addressing his people against the backdrop of defeat to Napoleon and French rule. It is therefore a "call to arms," not in a militaristic sense, but a spiritual one appealing to the **German people's collective identity.****

Speaking in and understanding a common language lies behind this appeal for **collective unity: "[...] the importance lies solely in the fact that this language continues to be spoken, for men are formed by language far more than language is formed by men" (p. 55). For Fichte, use of the vernacular means that all Germans share a collective ancestry and have been shaped by the same linguistic forces. The development of the German language is "[...] in no way dependent on arbitrary decisions and agreements" (p. 56), but the result of active decisions specific to German historical and cultural heritage. Fichte goes on to clarify this position:**

"If we give the name of People to men whose organs of speech are influenced by the same external conditions, who live together, and who develop their language in continuous communication with each other, then we must say: the language of this people is necessarily just what it is, and in reality this people does not express its knowledge, but its knowledge expresses itself out of the mouth of the people" (p. 56).

The collective knowledge of the German people is expressed through language, which is shared and used by the present population. Language is indispensable to *Bildung* and understanding **one's identity since the use of foreign words makes one foreign to oneself.**



German as a “living language” is needed to bring about *Bildung*, in contrast to neo-Latin languages, which are “dead.” A “living language” influences the entire development of a people and, as Fichte explains:

“[...] accompanies the individual into the most secret depths of his mind in thought and will and either hinders him or gives him wings, which unites within its domain the whole mass of men who speak it into one single and common **understanding [...]**” (p. 69).

The “living language” unifies the German people in collective identity and shared understanding. German as a “living language” is needed for *Bildung*: “**where the people has a living language, mental *Bildung* influences life; where the contrary is the case, mental *Bildung* and life got their way independently of each other**” (p. 70). A “living language” (which, for Fichte, must be German) is needed to foster *Bildung*; otherwise, *Bildung* remains detached from the lived experiences of the people.

### Summary

**The above analysis focuses on Fichte’s** (1808/ 1922) conception of *Bildung* as illustrated in his “Addresses.” Three key tenets were identified and analyzed: developing a stable, moral will, creating an image of moral order and use of German as a “living language.” **The relation of an individual’s formation in relation to that of the nation is key throughout this conception: Fichte’s (1808/ 1922) *Bildung* is the educational concept needed to rebuild the German nation.** It would be disingenuous to present this as an exhaustive analysis of *Bildung* in the “Addresses”; rather, it should be seen as a

selection of important facets from an educationalist perspective.

### A concept in motion: from Fichte to Grundtvig

This section describes how the concept of *Bildung* became that of *dannelse*, i.e., not only connections between Fichte and Grundtvig, but also other important influences on Grundtvig that affected conceptual change. It first provides **evidence of Fichte’s influence on Grundtvig**, both directly through works including the “Addresses,” and indirectly through the lectures of Henrik Steffens<sup>11</sup> and **Fichte’s time spent in Copenhagen**. It then examines two further key **influences on Grundtvig’s thinking: travels to England and Nordic mythology**. As the subsequent analysis aims to demonstrate, these factors impacted conceptual change(s) that **become evident in Grundtvig’s *dannelse***.

### *Fichte’s influence on Grundtvig*

Grundtvig read works by Fichte, including “Addresses to the German Nation,” which influenced his conception of *dannelse*. It is well documented that Romantic German philosophical ideas, **including Fichte’s, are evident in Grundtvig’s works** (Andersen & Björkman, 2017; Broadbridge et al., 2011; Grattan, 1958; Palmer & Fackenthal, 1946). Yet the fact that **Grundtvig’s ideas** express a similar sentiment to those of Fichte does not prove a direct influence. For example, it could have been that Grundtvig and Fichte developed analogous ideas independently of one another. More compelling evidence is documented in the works of Grundtvig himself. A key term search of **“Fichte” in Grundtvig’s entire collection of works** on *grundtvigsvaerker.dk* yields 48 results (these are direct references or citations Grundtvig

<sup>11</sup> Henrik Steffens was a Norwegian philosopher and physicist who studied at the universities of Copenhagen,

Kiel, Jena, and Berlin. He was a well-known figure within the “Jena Romantik” group of academics (Peters, 1980).



makes of Fichte). Moreover, in “*Mands Minde*,” Grundtvig (1838/ 1877, p. 194) explicitly **references Fichte’s (1808/ 1922) “Addresses”**: Grundtvig was not only influenced by Fichte, but also evidently read his “Addresses.”

To understand the connection more deeply, it helps to rewind some years prior to the “Addresses.” In 1802, 19 year-old Grundtvig was in the audience listening to his cousin Henrik **Steffens’** lecture in Copenhagen. Steffens had just returned from studying at the University of Jena, which was rapidly establishing itself as the intellectual heart of German philosophical thought, and of which Fichte was Chair of Critical Philosophy at the time. In his autobiographical work, Steffens (1844/ 1874) notes the influence that Fichte had on him **during this time: “I could not help loving him,** and the strength of his moral convictions, forming as they did the basis of his whole philosophy, won for him my **high respect”** (p. 62). Listening to the talks inspired Grundtvig: he was captivated by the ideas of his cousin, which motivated him to further study the work of Fichte and other Jena academics both at the **time and of Fichte’s later publications** (Andersen & Björkman, 2017).

Fichte also spent time in Copenhagen, Denmark, which further consolidates his **influence on Grundtvig and the latter’s** conception of *dannelse*. On fleeing Berlin from Napoleon in 1806, Fichte went first to stay with Kant in Königsberg, and then to Copenhagen, where he stayed for two months. Here, he conversed with leading Danish thinkers, such as Adam Oehlenschläger and Hans Christian Ørsted, through his involvement with the influential Rahbek salon (Andersen & Björkman,

2017).<sup>12</sup> Whilst there is no evidence to suggest that Grundtvig personally met Fichte during this time, members of the Rahbek salon were part of **Grundtvig’s social circle in Copenhagen**. It therefore seems reasonable to assert that he must have heard what Fichte said and did during his time there (Andersen & Björkman, 2017).

Furthermore, Grundtvig illustrates his **indebtedness to Fichte’s thinking directly**. **Following Fichte’s death in 1814, Grundtvig** writes him a memorial poem:

“Fichte! Yes, as long as I may live,  
you I neither can nor must forget,  
nor yet deny that I have held you dear,  
and to your mighty voice was once in  
**debt. [...]**” (Øhrgaard, 2015, p. 220).

The very fact that Grundtvig writes a memorial poem is testament to his respect and **indebtedness to Fichte’s thinking**. That said, the above passage also illustrates how Grundtvig’s own thinking has taken its own course: he “was once in debt” to Fichte’s ideas but has now moved on. Grundtvig’s thinking, including his conception of *dannelse*, continues to move on **after Fichte’s death** and is influenced by other factors, as documented below.

### ***Grundtvig’s travels to England***

**Grundtvig’s (1832/ 2011) *dannelse*** is shaped by his travels to England, where he stayed for over 3 months each summer in 1829, 1830, and 1831, and later in 1843. In England, Grundtvig encountered a modern society: whilst there were certain aspects of industrialism which he found horrifying (such as increased

<sup>12</sup> Salons were important academic gathering places in Denmark and Sweden in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Discussion between scholars would regularly take

place in such salons, of which Karen Margarethe Rahbek’s, hosted at her home, was one of the most highly regarded (Sørensen, 2011).

mechanization and the appalling working conditions of factory workers), he was generally enlivened by the dynamism of a modern society (Vind, 2015). What underpinned this dynamism were English liberties and a high degree of **freedom in all aspects of individuals' lives. He** later makes clear his admiration for and **influence by England: “[...] I have most certainly not gained my political upbringing in or from France, but in and from England [emphasis in original]” (cited in Korsgaard, 2015, p. 193).**

Grundtvig stayed at the colleges of Cambridge and Oxford universities in England, experiences which further factored into his conception of *dannelse*. During the summer visit of 1831, Grundtvig (1831/ 2002) writes a letter home in which he comments on how enjoyable his stay has been, and specifically commends the communality of the informal dining arrangements between students and teachers: **“in the colleges one eats in a great hall at long tables with benches as in farmhouse living-rooms [...]” (p. 76). Such an arrangement** facilitated the informal exchange of ideas outside of the confines of the lecture hall. He is furthermore impressed by the free exchanges between teachers and students, and open debates which could continue for hours (Bhattacharya, 2005).

That said, Grundtvig is not entirely positive about England. Prior to his travels, Grundtvig (1828/ 2011) comments on what he sees as the negative aspects of the English education at Cambridge and Oxford and argues **that “[...] it is high time to build a more broad-based college than the present one” (p. 39).** Whilst Grundtvig evidently holds many aspects of English education in high regard, he also seeks to popularize it in Denmark, later deriding **Cambridge and Oxford as “scholar-factories” (p. 40).** In contrast, *dannelse* should be for all: peasants and scholars alike.

## *Nordic mythology*

**Another major influence on Grundtvig's** (1832/ 2011) *dannelse* is Nordic mythology. Allegorical tales are ever-present throughout his works, with Gods such as Aesir, Bragi, and Odin deployed to cast reflections on contemporary society. For Grundtvig (1847/ 2013), **“all genuine myths are the ‘articulation of life’ of the corresponding people's spirit” (cited in Bønding et al., 2021, p. 16).** Nordic mythology represents not just sagas and tales confined to the past but also narratives of symbolic meaning for life of the people, and for this reason it should be respected and understood (Jonas, 2015). Myths are not mere fictions, but instead historically oriented and to be considered forms of advanced cognition born by images.

The importance of Nordic mythology to Grundtvig is further demonstrated by the homonymous title assigned to the text chosen for analysis. Nordic mythology is, for Grundtvig, **an “obsessive passion,”** following years of fervent study and writing on the theme (Holm, 2009, p. 96). “Nordic mythology” is his most influential work in this area, representing a coming together of mythological and educational ideas such as *dannelse* (Broadbridge et al., 2011). **Grundtvig's use of Nordic mythology can be seen** as an attempt to reenchant the present education of Danes, having previously been disenchanted during the enlightenment rationalism of the 18th century. For Grundtvig, society had been left void of any enchantment, fantastic elements in favor of rationality. In the name of reason, the supernatural and fantastical-metaphysical had been left empty of any truth-value (Bønding, 2021). Nordic mythology was to be used as a common frame of reference for the Danish people, as a social adhesive to connect the whole population.

### Summary

The above description documents the means of travel, in other words, how Fichte influenced Grundtvig, as well as other factors that contributed to conceptual change (from *Bildung* to *dannelse*). **Fichte's influence on Grundtvig was established principally by documenting that Grundtvig read and directly cited the "Addresses" in his work. It was further deepened by arguing the influence of Henrik Steffens' lectures in 1802 and Fichte's time spent in Copenhagen in 1806. Key factors that further impacted Grundtvig were identified as his travels to England and reading of Nordic mythology. These influences were introduced above; the next section aspires to clarify how these influences are manifested in Grundtvig's (1832/ 2011) *dannelse*.**

### Grundtvig's *dannelse* in "Nordic Mythology"

"Nordic Mythology"<sup>13</sup> begins with a **rhymed letter, "To our Nordic next-of-kin,"** followed by sub-titled sections of prose. Throughout the work, Grundtvig addresses his "people," **as shown from the opening line, "Sons and daughters of Nordic spirit [...]" (p. 43). The text is written not just for other scholars, but for everyone "of Nordic spirit."<sup>14</sup> Later in the text, Grundtvig makes the address to his fellow **people more emotive: "Never, therefore, have we Northerners been addressed by the signs of the times so earnestly as now!" (p. 56). The use of the personal pronoun "we" is significant:** Grundtvig sees himself as one of the very people he is addressing, not aloof or "above" his fellow**

countrymen/ women/ other. The work is polymathic, covering cultural, educational, political, and theological issues (Broadbridge et al., 2011). As such, the below analysis does not attempt to be exhaustive, but rather focuses on **the text's conception of *dannelse* from an educationalist perspective and compares this to Fichte's (1808/ 1922) *Bildung*.**

### Mother-tongue as "living language"

Grundtvig (1832/ 2011) shares Fichte's (1808/ 1922) zeal for use of the mother-tongue. **For Grundtvig, use of the vernacular is "[...] like life in its contrast to death, can only be expressed by a living voice [...] [emphasis in original]" (p. 58). Danish is a "living language," in contrast to Latin which is "dead." Grundtvig makes his distaste for Latin clear: Latin is "[...] an open enemy, oppressing the nations and, in the shape of an eagle, pecking out their eyes and drinking their heart's blood" (p. 58). Danish is "living" in that it shapes and is shaped by people's lived experiences within their communities. Latin is "dead" since it is predominantly a written language, spoken only by a limited academic elite. *Dannelse* can be brought about based primarily on the "living," spoken word in the mother-tongue and not based on Latin literature. Whilst Grundtvig is evidently not against books or reading (he himself remains an avid reader and writer throughout his life), it is spoken word in the vernacular that allows people to meet and connect with others (Jonas, 2015). Use of the mother-tongue (Danish) as a "living language" is**

<sup>13</sup> References to this text are numerous in the following pages. As such, citations are listed with just the page number in parentheses wherever such a reference is made.

<sup>14</sup> Grundtvig here is referring to more than just Denmark. He later makes his view clear on who exactly he is referring to: **"I do not take the word 'Danish' in the restricted sense that I have so often used before- and even more often used as a term of praise. I mean it in the *old-Nordic* sense, when**

Denmark stretched not just from the Ejder to Tromsø, and from the North Sea to the Gulf of Finland, but also across the **ocean to the Nordic emigrants from the Isle of Hercules" (p. 59). The "Isle of Hercules" is a way Grundtvig uses to refer to England. In other words, the addresses of this text are all those from the river Ejder in Kiel (present-day Germany) to Tromsø (present-day Norway), and those in England.**

needed for *dannelse*, just as German is for **Fichte's (1808/ 1922) *Bildung***.

However, Grundtvig's (1832/ 2011) conception of *dannelse* **departs from Fichte's (1808/ 1922) *Bildung*** in its approach: **Grundtvig's (1832/ 2011) *dannelse*** intends to be all-inclusive, from the ground-up, whereas **Fichte's (1808/ 1922) *Bildung*** is abstract and to be attained first by academics. **Grundtvig's (1832/ 2011) *dannelse*** appears "folksier" in this regard, taken to encompass the entirety of human experience and not just "bookish" academia. This position is clarified by making a distinction between "learning" and *dannelse*:

**"We must realise** that learning is one thing and that *dannelse* and fitness for life as a person and citizen is another [...]. **For *dannelse*** and fitness for life must always be suited to the life of the people here and now, whereas learning **is for human life in general.** [...]  
Moreover, learning, particularly amongst proper scholars (the schoolmasters), will lead us astray if there is no folke-*dannelse* at hand **countering it [...]"** (pp. 65 – 66).

For Grundtvig, the use of Latin promulgates a social divide since the elite (aristocrats, academics, and cultured bourgeoisie) learn Latin, but the rest of the population (farmers and farm hands) do not. This divide threatens social cohesion, which needs to be countered through *dannelse* in the mother-tongue. Academic and popular education are hereby connected: there should not be a split between the "folk" **and the scholars. It is not the scholars'** task to bring everyone to their own abstract sphere of existence; the academics (Grundtvig

included) should instead bring themselves into **people's reality. This differs to Fichte's (1808/ 1922) more academic conception of *Bildung***, which is first fostered by scholars, then disseminated to laypeople. In contrast, *dannelse* cannot be fostered from above; it is based on conversation and the life-wisdom of the "folk" to bring about a flourishing civil society.

#### *Freedom of expression*

Freedom of expression is key in **Grundtvig's (1832/ 2011) *dannelse***, further **differentiating it from Fichte's (1808/ 1922) *Bildung***. This freedom, which Grundtvig had recently experienced first-hand on trips to England, comes to the fore in his much-quoted **passage: "freedom our watchword must be in the North! Freedom for Loki as well as for Thor"** (p. 49).<sup>15</sup> Even though Loki and Thor have differing views of the world, they should both be granted the same freedom. Although Grundtvig is critical **of Loki's conception of freedom, which he sees as being too selfish**, he believes there must still be room for this world-view (Korsgaard, 2011). **Grundtvig continues: "free then be Loki, as Bragi and Thor [...]"** (p. 50). The reference to Bragi, son of Odin, God of poetry and eloquence (**Broadbridge et al., 2011**), alludes to Grundtvig's emphasis on freedom of expression. Everyone needs to be free to express themselves in different ways, be that poetry, **one of Grundtvig's preferred means of expression as illustrated by the above reference to Bragi, or other.** This can **be contrasted with Fichte's (1808/ 1922) *Bildung***, which emphasizes not freedom of expression, but stability of will.

**Grundtvig's (1832/ 2011) *dannelse*** is not only tolerant of divergent views but sees it as necessary for such views to be exchanged in the

<sup>15</sup> Loki is best-known as the trickster God in Nordic mythology. Thor, God of thunder, is often represented as his companion.

living world. Freedom of expression goes beyond open-mindedness; it should also actively be extended to those with different views, with whom one should openly challenge (Vind, 2015). This challenge should come through open discussion and exchange of words, not force or **physical power: “Alone call him ‘free’ is that man who [...] is freely allowed all his words to unlock!” (pp. 49 – 50)**. Grundtvig had seen at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge what such a free discussion and exchange of ideas could look like, and now promotes this openness in his conception of *dannelse*. *Dannelse* is **hereby in a sense less prescriptive than Fichte’s (1808/ 1922) *Bildung***, which stipulates the need for individuals to express themselves so that they create morally desirable order in society.

#### *Social cohesion*

**Grundtvig’s (1832/ 2011) *dannelse* shares with Fichte’s (1808/ 1922) *Bildung*** the focus of social cohesion, but also extends it to belonging within the whole of humankind. Being members of society requires shouldering responsibility for the common good. For Grundtvig, this is best achieved by giving individuals the freedom to take on this responsibility. It is not a complete freedom, since this would lead to the dissolution of society (as witnessed in the French revolution), but rather a freedom which emphasizes the ties of the individual and collective. There is no place for absolute individualism, since society rests on a shared understanding of the common good: **“This new-Danish way of life and *dannelse* [...] liberates, strengthens, and delights all that is in harmony with the temporal welfare of the individual, the nations, and the whole race of man” (pp. 57 – 58)**. *Dannelse* needs to include the freedom required for people to become individuals, but this should be in harmony with civil society first at the national level, then also at the global. *Dannelse* is needed so that

individuals understand themselves not only as self-governing but also morally enmeshed within the community – be that a people, nation, or world (Pedersen, 2015). The circle of belonging for *dannelse* is at the level of not just the nation, but also the whole of humankind.

**Grundtvig’s (1832/ 2011)** use of Nordic mythology marks another clear break from **Fichte’s (1808/ 1922) *Bildung***. Grundtvig envisages a re-enchantment of the Danish world view, a *dannelse* which binds together its people using Nordic mythology as cohesive. Grundtvig is critical of the rationality associated with other Enlightenment thinkers, which he saw as potentially creating too much individualism, lacking in spiritual or mythological concern to act as a cohesive at a collective level. What is left to bind together society if it is no longer Christianity? Grundtvig implores us to

**“[...] consider what was missing in the idea of mankind’s development which dissolved into emptiness and impotence. Dare to grasp the idea of man in all its high and low, heavenly and earthly mysteriousness [...]” (p. 56)**.

United strength and mutual sacrifice are needed for the Danish nation, bound together with the cohesive of “mysterious” Nordic mythology. The *dannelse* articulated here is built on a higher **right than the individual’s; it is a shared** consciousness at the collective level that takes heed of the importance of imaginations and emotions contained within mythology. In **contrast, Fichte’s (1808/ 1922) *Bildung*** is far more rational, premised on the will of each individual.

#### *Summary*

The preceding analysis focuses on **Grundtvig’s (1832/ 2011) conception of *dannelse*** in “Nordic mythology.” To do this, three facets of

*dannelse* were identified and analyzed: use of the mother-tongue as a “living language,” freedom of expression, and social cohesion. For each tenet, conceptual synergies and differences with Fichte’s (1808/ 1922) *Bildung* were analyzed. **Key throughout Grundtvig’s (1832/ 2011) *dannelse*, as in Fichte’s (1808/ 1922) *Bildung*, is the relational conception of the individual to the nation, with *dannelse* a key educational concept needed to build the Danish nation. However, *dannelse* and *Bildung* are not one and the same: there are key differences pertaining to Grundtvig’s travels to England and influence of Nordic mythology.**

### Conclusion

To conclude, this paper first argues that **Fichte’s (1808/ 1922) *Bildung* and Grundtvig’s (1832/ 2011) *dannelse*** can in some senses be seen as parallel concepts of similarity, explained by **Fichte’s strong influence on Grundtvig. Both Fichte (1808/ 1922) and Grundtvig (1832/ 2011) abhor the use of Latin; to foster *Bildung* or *dannelse* requires use of the mother-tongue as a “living language.” This is connected to the importance of social cohesion. Pursuing the interests of the common good is needed to foster *Bildung* and *dannelse*. Fichte and Grundtvig are both “educators of the people” in this regard: *Bildung* and *dannelse* are needed at the collective level to bind together their respective “people.”**

**This research also posits that Fichte’s (1808/ 1922) *Bildung* and Grundtvig’s (1832/ 2011) *dannelse* can be seen as concepts of difference, explained by the influential factors of Grundtvig’s travels to England and Nordic mythology. First, *dannelse* popularized *Bildung*, in that it was intended to be for all, not just the academic elite but also laypeople/ folk. Second, the freedom of mind and expression Grundtvig experienced on visits to England can be seen in**

his conception of *dannelse*, in contrast to the stability and moral order emphasized in **Fichte’s (1808/ 1922) *Bildung***. Third, whilst Fichte (1808/ 1922) urges national unity with other **Germans, Grundtvig’s (1832/ 2011) *dannelse*** embraces a wider circle of belonging: the whole of humankind. **Fourth, Grundtvig’s (1832/ 2011) *dannelse*** is built on Nordic mythology as a social cohesive, in contrast to **Fichte’s (1808/ 1922)** more rational conception of *Bildung*. Evidently, it follows that *Bildung* and *dannelse* are not one and the same. To translate them synonymously overlooks the rich cultural and historical heritage of each concept. This paper has aspired to uncover these semantic idiosyncrasies to better understand misunderstandings and forge greater understanding of *Bildung* and *dannelse*: parallel concepts of both similarity and difference.

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