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**A CRITIC AND HIS NETWORK
Georg Brandes as a Key Figure
of the Modern Breakthrough in the Baltic Area States**

To what extent did the Danish critic, Georg Brandes, affect the breakthrough of modern literature in the Baltic states? This is a complex question and it is impossible to offer a satisfactory or complete answer in a paper like this. I intend to focus here on his role in the Baltic area states, in Poland, Latvia, Finland, and Sweden by - in the footprints of Brandes - taking my readers on a tour from Copenhagen to Warsaw, and from there to Riga, Helsinki and Stockholm. I assume that the influence of Georg Brandes was as strong in Estonia and Lithuania, but I cannot cover these two countries since I don't master these languages, and so few documents have been available to me in German, French and English.

Brandes was, in my view, especially suitable as a mediator between the Baltic states and Western Europe. He himself belonged to a small country in Southern Scandinavia, and, at the end of the 19th century, Copenhagen was the cultural center of the North. Brandes had an open mind not only for what was going on in the big European countries, in Germany, France and England. He was extremely well informed about the literary situation in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, and during his long career as a leading critic he took a vivid interest in, for example, Polish, Russian, Belgian and Dutch literatures, as well. That is why he became a key figure and an inspiration to those who took the lead in the modern breakthrough of the Baltic area states. His books and articles were, to a great extent, available in German, Russian and Polish. We know that the Latvian playwright, novelist, and critic, Laura Mohr, corresponded with Brandes and paid a visit to him in Copenhagen in order to attend his lectures at the university there. Her native language was German and she translated Brandes' influential essay on Nietzsche into that language. Later on she married a Swedish writer, Ola Hansson, and made a career as a critic in Germany. She is a significant example of how a contact with Brandes might affect a life career. As early as 1884, when she still lived in Riga and had made successful debut with a historical drama there, she wrote to Brandes:

Ich sehe in ihnen die Hauptzüge der modernen ethischen Ideen, die die künftigen Geschlechter erziehen werden. Den Ausdruck, der mir mangelte, fand ich in Ihren Hauptströmungen scharf zugespitzt in dem Ausspruch: die wahre Moral ist das radikalste Element, das es giebt.¹

Georg Brandes was born in 1842 in Copenhagen and both his parents were Jews. That fact alienated him, to a certain extent, from the cultural setting of his native country. He studied at the University of Copenhagen and received a Ph.D. there in 1870, but by that time he had made several trips to Germany and France. He had already moved away from the post-romantic ideas of literary criticism. During the 1870s, the naturalistic philosophy of Hippolyte Taine was very important to him, but he also studied the writings of John Stuart Mill, for example, with special care. He became personally acquainted with them both during a stay in Paris in 1870.

Brandes became a central figure of the so-called Modern Breakthrough in Scandinavian literature when he started a series of lectures at the University of Copenhagen: *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature*, gradually given from the beginning of 1871 up to 1891, and published in six volumes. *Main Currents* is a brilliant, though polemic, literary history of French, German and English literature covering the first half of the 19th century. His books were translated into German from the start and, in 1877, he moved to Berlin. The climate in Denmark had been too hostile to him because of his criticism of the social and cultural conditions of his home country. For six years Brandes stayed in Berlin, wrote in German, gave lectures all over Germany and contributed to German newspapers and magazines, primarily to *Deutsche Rundschau*. All the time, he kept close contact with Ibsen, Bjørnson, Kielland, Strindberg, Jacobsen and other leading writers in Scandinavia. In 1883, he returned to Copenhagen.

The stay in Berlin was, however, of great importance for his contact with Poland, Russia and other Baltic states. Alert readers from all over Northern and Eastern Europe had access to his essays in German maga-

¹Susan Brantly, 'The Life and Writing of Laura Marholm', *Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie* 21, p. 21.

zines and books like *Main Currents*, in German translation. In 1887 Brandes published a collection of essays in German titled *Moderne Geister* (Modern Spirits). The book presented articles on Paul Heyse, Max Klinger, Ernest Renan, Gustave Flaubert, Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, Ivan Turgenev, John Stuart Mill, Hans Christian Andersen, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Henrik Ibsen. We know, for example, that the Latvian critic, Theodor Zeifert, was familiar with this book.

Poland

In 1885 Brandes made his first visit to Poland. He was invited to lecture in Warsaw. Later on in his book, *Impressions of Poland* (1888), he described his meeting with the culturally oppressed Polish people. Russian censorship treated him with hostility when he passed the border. Every book, every article, magazine and newspaper he brought with him was scrutinized and some were confiscated.

Brandes observed that the Russian language was compulsory in schools and at the university. He lectured primarily on Scandinavian literature this time: Hans Christian Andersen, Kierkegaard and Ibsen. He was far from unknown to Polish intellectuals when he arrived in Warsaw in 1885. Four volumes of *Main Currents* had already been published in *Prawda*, at that time a radical Polish newspaper. *Moderne Geister* had run in an abbreviated version in the magazine *Slowo* in 1882, the same year as it was available in German. This fact shows that Polish contact with the German intellectual scene was very close and that knowledge of Brandes as a critic emerged from Germany to a greater extent than directly from Scandinavia.

It is hard to evaluate the impact the works of Brandes had on the cultural climate in Polen. One of the most distinguished Polish writers at the time, 21 year old Stefan Zeromski, was quite absorbed by his reading of *Main Currents* in translation, as we can observe from his diary: "Last night I was reading Brandes until late at night. How much charm he has for me I even do not try to describe."²

²Zenon Ciesielski, 'Brandes and Poland', in: Hans Hertel and Sven Møller

Brandes returned to Poland several times. He lectured in French in the town hall of Warsaw, and the big newspapers covered the event by extensive reports. The impact of his three visits in 1885, 1886, and 1887 must have been quite strong and he was received as a celebrity in Warsaw. His lectures gave Polish intellectuals an opportunity to demonstrate a form of passive resistance to the Russification of the the cultural life. Brandes commented on this in a letter:

If the genius of liberty had become a human being and paid a visit to this unfortunate country for 12 days, she might not have been received differently than I.³

But Brandes was a mediator. He brought his interpretation of modern Western European literature to Poland but, when doing so, he was captivated by the great achievements of Polish literature. From his Polish friends he borrowed books and articles in German and French on Polish literature, and also books on Lithuanian literature, such as Nesselmann's *Lithauische Volkslieder*. Based on this material and with support from Polish friends, who translated the text directly into Danish and German for him, he wrote one of the very first introductions to Polish literature for Scandinavian readers. This book was published in 1888, with the title *Indtryk fra Polen (Impressions of Poland)*, together with a similar book on Russia. Both were also translated into Polish and German.

Brandes' book, *Impressions of Poland*, is partly a literary history and a survey of the contemporary cultural situation, based on his three visits to the country. This book was later included in his *Collected Works* and, then, he added a report from a visit to Lwów in 1899. The starting point of his literary survey is the 17th century, but the main accent is on the period 1820-1850, which he singles out as the richest and most significant years of Polish literature. Brandes had already in his *Main Currents* covered the romantic schools in Germany, France and England. The romanticists in

Kristensen, *The Activist Critic*, Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1980, p. 208.

³Georg Brandes in a letter to his mother February 15 1885. The Brandes Archive of The Royal Library, Copenhagen. Concerning Brandes' visits to Poland see also my book *Den gode europén. Studier i Georg Brandes' idéutveckling 1871-1893*. Stockholm, 1965, pp 208-229.

Scandinavia were well-known to him. In his book on Poland he discusses the great Polish romantic writers, and he can compare, for example, Mickiewicz with a Frenchman like Hugo or a Finnish-Swedish writer like Runeberg and arrive at the conclusion that Mickiewicz had about the same position in his native country as Tegnér and Oehlenschläger in Scandinavia. In his *Main Currents*, Brandes was critical of the romantic movement in general and the romantic school in Germany in particular. He did not like the adoration of medieval fairy tales and folk songs. He constantly encouraged his fellow writers to deal with contemporary life and problems. He strongly advocated realism. That is why he was pleased to discover that Polish romanticists were closer to reality than their fellow writers in Scandinavia and Western Europe. I cannot determine if he was right, but in any case he was enthusiastic about the romantic school in Poland. Mickiewicz was born in the Lithuanian part of Poland, and his most significant work, *Pan Tadeusz* (1824), takes place in Lithuania. To Brandes, this epic tale is far more significant than similar achievements by Tegnér or Oehlenschläger. He is full of admiration for the detailed, careful, description of the Lithuanian countryside at the beginning of the 19th century.

In his book on Poland, Brandes also discussed some contemporary writers, among others Sienkiewicz and Eliza Orzeszkowa. He is rather positive about the early realistic writings of Sienkiewicz but negative towards his historical novels, which became so popular all over Europe. Brandes considered this kind of literature a return to the ideas of Walter Scott, a writer he disliked. When, in 1905, Sienkiewicz was awarded the Nobel prize, Brandes did not approve. Nevertheless, Brandes included Sienkiewicz in his reference to the literary situation in Poland in 1900:

Nobody among the leading men in the three parts of Poland is unfamiliar to me, neither those politically active like Koscielski, or conservative writers, like Sienkiewicz, or radical authors, like Swientochowski, or alert narrators, like Gawalewicz. There are men like those and others who have maintained the national identity of this divided nation.⁴

⁴Georg Brandes, 'Tanker ved Aarhundredskiftet', in: *Samlede Skrifter* XII, p. 160.

He acknowledged the talent of Orzeszkowa but the Jewish cultural setting in her novels was a bit alien to him.

Latvia

The Latvian critic and literary scholar, Theodor Zeifert, referred to Brandes for the first time in an article in the magazine *Dienas Lapa* in 1891, and in his autobiography he states that he read *Main Currents* and other works by Brandes in the Public Library of Riga in 1894. He found many similarities with his own ideas at that time. He wrote to Brandes in 1896, but, at that period in his career, the Dane was overburdened with letters from all over Europe and answered with some delay. Zeifert asked for a portrait of Brandes and some biographical information. Brandes did not offer much information about himself and was very critical of the German editions of his works available to Zeifert. In any case, Zeifert wrote a series of essays on Brandes in the Latvian magazine *Austrums* in 1897.⁵ During his career as a critic and historian, Zeifert was influenced by Brandes to the extent that he referred to him in almost every essay he published. His dependence on Brandes was, in fact, so close that he was accused of being an epigonic follower of the Danish critic. That is hardly the case, since he and other Latvian critics, such as Jansons (Browns), discovered Brandes and his critical theories in a rather late stage of the modern breakthrough in Latvia. Brandes was regularly characterized as a follower of Taine and an advocate of realism and positivism.

There is no doubt, though, that Brandes inspired Latvian critics and intellectuals to study Danish literature, for example, and writers such as Bjørnson and Ibsen. Brandes' essays on French, German, and Russian literature were also read in German and Russian translation. Some articles by Brandes were translated into Latvian, for example, his essay "On reading".

Zeifert was born in 1865 and studied at a teachers' college. For several years he lectured at the Latvian university of Riga. He was the editor of a magazine, *Jauna Raza*, from 1898 to 1910, and of *Druva* 1913-14. He favoured a realistic approach, in the spirit of Taine and Brandes and wrote

⁵Theodor Zeifert, 'Georg Brandes', in: *Austrums* No 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, 1897.

a literary history of Latvia, in three volumes (1922-25).

When Brandes died in 1927, several articles appeared honoring his contribution to Latvian literature. The wellknown playwright and poet Jānis Rainis wrote a letter of condolence to the Minister of Education in Denmark.

Finland and Russia

Brandes' trip to Russia and Finland in 1887 turned out to be a turning point in his life, according to his own evaluation twenty years later when writing his autobiography.⁶ He discovered a new world in a prerevolutionary Russia boiling with new radical ideas and new views of art. One reason for his being so positive toward the intellectual climate in Russia was, of course, the fact that he was welcomed as the most distinguished critic in Europe. His host in St. Petersburg was a lawyer, Alexander Passauvert, who had received his degree from the University of Oxford and whose great interest was English and French literature. The secretary general of the Russian Writers Union, Eugen Utin, also played an important role in hosting Brandes in St Petersburg, as did M. Saussulevitsj, the editor of one of the most influential magazines at that time, *Vestnik Jevropi*, which published Brandes' lectures. On April 25, 27, 29, and May 2, Brandes lectured in St Petersburg, in French, on, among others, Zola, George Sand, Sainte-Beuve, Taine and Kierkegaard. The first volumes of *Main Currents* were, at that time, already available in Russian. Later, there was also a Russian edition of his collected works. A two volume edition included Brandes' essays on the most significant modern Scandinavian writers: Henrik Ibsen, Alexander Kielland, J. P. Jacobsen, Hans Christian Andersen, Anne Charlotte Leffler, Esaias Tegnér, Ellen Key and August Strindberg.

In 1887, Finland was a part of the Russian empire, and the contacts between St Petersburg and Helsinki were rather close. During his stay in St Petersburg, Brandes was invited to Helsinki where he lectured, as well, but in Danish. Brandes was, of course, rather well-known as a critic in Helsinki. The first part of his *Main Currents* was translated into Finnish in

⁶Georg Brandes, *Levned* III, p. 191.

1887 and might have been available when he visited Helsinki in May that year, but those who understood Swedish had no problem reading him in Danish.

One of the leading writers of the Swedish-Finnish breakthrough, Karl A. Tavaststjerna, wrote to Brandes in 1891 and sent him his book *Hårda tider* (*Hard times*) and they exchanged a few letters.⁷ They had established personal contact during Tavaststjerna's stay in Copenhagen in 1888. Tavaststjerna wrote about the importance of Brandes' work for the intellectual circles in Finland. They fought against Russian oppression in about the same way as did Brandes' friends in Poland. Tavaststjerna died already in 1897, and in a short essay titled "Finland", Brandes saluted his contribution to the modern breakthrough in Scandinavia:

Nobody has shown such great promise as he did, nobody reached such a high point in his lyrical talent, nobody was like him such a powerful mixture of Finnish and Modern European spirit...⁸

In 1897 Tavaststjerna sent two books to Brandes, *A Patriot without Fatherland*, and a collection of poems. Brandes reviewed *A Patriot without Fatherland*, which had caused Tavaststjerna troubles with the Russian censor, and Tavaststjerna was most grateful for the support.

Brandes had a similar contact with one of the most significant Finnish writers of the late 19th century: Juhani Aho. In a letter to Brandes in 1891 Aho writes: "You have paid a visit to our country and your writings have had as big an influence on us as all over Scandinavia."⁹ He was speaking for the new wave of young Finnish writers. At the same time he sent Brandes a collection of short stories *Spånor* ("Chips"), which had been translated into Swedish. In the essay on Finland mentioned above, Brandes refers to Aho as the most distinguished representative of Finnish literature at that time. Aho also sent his novel *Alene* ("Alone") to Brandes, who, in a letter, called it an excellent story and a refined work of art. This response from the Danish critic evidently

⁷ *Georg og Edv. Brandes Brevveksling med nordiske Forfattere og Videnskabsmænd* VII. Udg. af Morten Borup. København, 1942.

⁸ Georg Brandes, *Samlede Skrifter* XI, p. 302.

⁹ *Georg og Edv. Brandes Brevveksling...* VII, p. 311.

meant much to Aho.

With no other Finnish or Swedish-Finnish writer did Brandes stay in such a close contact as with Werner Söderhjelm, who wrote to Brandes in 1900 and thanked him for a speech Brandes had delivered to a group of Finnish choir singers visiting Copenhagen that year.¹⁰ He now asked Brandes to contribute to a Finnish magazine to be published in German as a manifestation of the Finnish cultural identity.¹¹ The German project failed after a few issues but a new version, now in French, *L'Européen*, sponsored with Finnish money, was realized in 1900. Brandes wrote about it very favourably in an attempt to support the fight for cultural and political freedom in Finland.

In a letter in 1907, Söderhjelm, at that time professor at the university of Helsinki, summarized his debt to Brandes.

First of all, I want once and for all to tell you how much I have owed you during my whole career, how much your works have contributed, in spite of all philology, to make me stick to a psychological and artistic approach to literature which have saved me from ending up in that kind of woodcutting that in some places is referred to as literary research.¹²

Sweden

At a very early stage in his career, Brandes had contacts with writers and intellectuals in Sweden. Victor Rydberg's book on Christ (*Bibelslära om Kristus*, 1862) meant a lot to him. Brandes' critical theories already influenced Strindberg as a student at the University of Uppsala, especially as

¹⁰Georg Brandes, *Samlede Skrifter* XI, p. 302.

¹¹*Georg og Edv. Brandes Brevveksling...* VII, p. 267. (Främst hade jag nu engång för alla velat säga Er, hur mycket jag haft Er att tacka för under hela min bana, hur mycket Era skrifter bidragit att, trots all filologi, hålla uppe hos mig den psykologiska och konstnärliga betraktelsen af litteraturen och räddat mig från att falla in i det vedhuggeri, som på vissa håll benämnes litteraturhistorisk forskning.)

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 269.

they were applied in his collection of essays, *Critical Studies and Portraits* (1870). *Main Currents* was favourably received in Sweden compared to the negative reception in Denmark. The Swedes evidently read *Main Currents* in Danish, and the first book by Brandes to be translated was his critical portrait of Søren Kierkegaard in 1877. The following year, his book on Esaias Tegnér was published in Swedish, too. Later, *Impressions of Poland* and the books on Ibsen and Lassalle were translated into Swedish. For several years during the 70's and 80's Brandes contributed to different Swedish newspapers and magazines, particularly to *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning*. In 1876, Brandes made his first lecture tour of Sweden. The subject was Kierkegaard, and he visited Stockholm, Uppsala, and Gothenburg. He stayed for three weeks in Stockholm, and, although the Swedes had some difficulty in understanding Danish, his presence and his lectures must have strengthened his position in Sweden.¹³

Almost all members of the radical group of young writers that dominated the Swedish literary scene in the 70's and 80's turned to Brandes for support and advice. They visited Copenhagen to listen to his lectures and they corresponded with him as did Anne Charlotte Leffler, Victoria Benedictsson, Ola Hansson, Gustaf af Geijerstam, and several others. It is impossible to deal with all these writers and their relationship to Brandes at this occasion. I will focus my discussion on one particular writer, August Strindberg. In his autobiography Strindberg summarizes his impression of reading Brandes for the first time in the early 70's and how it liberated him from an old, dated view of what literary criticism was about:

Brandes did not write as others; he did not observe as others and it looked like he had a more refined mechanism of thinking than the old ones. He started from an existing fact; examined it; divided the work of art into pieces; showed us its anatomy and its physiology without stating if it was beautiful or not beautiful.¹⁴

Brandes' essay, "The unlimited small and the unlimited great in poetry" (1870) with its interpretation of the way realism was applied in the

¹³Georg Brandes, *Levned* II, pp. 204-208.

¹⁴August Strindberg, *Samlade Skrifter* 18, Stockholm, 1913, p. 373.

historical plays by Shakespeare, had a big impact on Strindberg when he himself started to write plays based on chronicles like those Shakespeare used. But the first letters were not exchanged between Strindberg and Brandes until in 1887. Strindberg was for a long time much closer to Georg Brandes' younger brother, Edvard, who worked as a drama critic and who was also a playwright. Edvard Brandes understood very early that Strindberg was an extremely talented writer. Since he had some influence on the Danish literary scene, he supported Strindberg in many ways. From the very first moment he read *The Red Room* (1879), Strindberg's breakthrough novel, he was captivated by the idea of having it published in Danish, he wrote in a letter to Strindberg in 1888.¹⁵ Strindberg's antisemitic essay in *The New Kingdom* (1882) caused a break in their relationship, but this was healed a couple of years later and Edvard Brandes offered to run *The Red Room* as serial story in *Politiken*, the new newspaper where he himself and Georg Brandes were the leading critics. In the same letter he told his Swedish colleague to consider him as his literary agent in Denmark. The correspondance between Strindberg and Edvard Brandes is marked by the discussion of translations of novels, short stories, and plays. Strindberg had found a well informed drama critic who could offer constructive and valuable criticism. That is why it was natural for Strindberg to send Edvard Brandes the manuscript of *The Father*, his first masterpiece as a playwright, and his Danish friend realized that this was something outstanding. He played an important role in getting it staged for the first time right there in Copenhagen.

When the rehearsal started at Casinotheatret, Strindberg asked Georg Brandes to step in as advisor or director. Edvard Brandes reviewed the production in *Politiken*. It was a serious attempt to establish Strindberg as the great playwright he really was. Strindberg sensed the friendly climate in Copenhagen, moved there, and tried to realize his project of an experimental theatre. In this undertaking, Edvard Brandes supported him by sending him articles about what was going on within the field of theatre, especially at the newly started Théâtre libre in Paris. This information, partly from *Le Figaro*, was very important to Strindberg, when at that time he arrived at a new concept of drama foreshadowing the chamber

¹⁵ *Georg og Edv. Brandes Brevveksling...* VI, pp.10-11.

play technique.

During his stay in Copenhagen in 1888 and 1889, Strindberg and Georg Brandes came closer to each other. Brandes lectured on Nietzsche, and thanks to him, Strindberg became acquainted with the German philosopher and they even exchanged a few letters. Strindberg has himself told us about his meeting with Brandes and how much he liked him as a person. When he returned from Paris after having experienced his so-called Inferno crisis, he stopped in Copenhagen and contacted Georg Brandes who paid a visit to the Swede at his hotel. Brandes has given a remarkable and vivid portrait of an eccentric Strindberg completely occupied by the study of the occult writers at that time en vogue in Paris but very alien to the views of a rationalist thinker like Brandes. Strindberg mentioned new names to Brandes: Papus, Peladan, Guaita, and Huysmans. They spent several hours together and Brandes concluded his report from their conversation as follows:

They closed the café and we kept on walking along the harbour, back and forth. One of Strindberg's last outbursts was: They have abolished all the old sensible ideas pleading progress.¹⁶

Brandes exercised his strongest influence on the modern breakthrough in Denmark, Sweden and Norway in the 1870's and 80's. When, later on, he was introduced into Latvia or Finland, his role became a bit different. In all these countries I have dealt with in this paper, he served as a stimulator and mediator. During his career as a leading Scandinavian critic, Brandes had established a network of contacts all over Europe. Magazines and newspapers were open to him in different languages. His books and articles were to a great extent translated into German, Russian, and Polish. This made him very influential also on writers in the Baltic area states.

¹⁶Stellan Ahlström & Torsten Eklund, *August Strindberg* 2, p. 118.

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