

## **Georg Brandes as a literary intermediary\***

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Scandinavia experienced a time of radical change. All areas of Scandinavian society – including the arts – were rapidly transformed. Looking at the arts, one of the results of this metamorphosis was, that many Scandinavian artists became prominent figures in the European avant-garde of late nineteenth and early twentieth century art. The painter Edvard Munch (1863-1944), the sculptor Gustav Vigeland (1869-1943), the composers Edvard Grieg (1843-1907), Carl Nielsen (1865-1931), Jean Sibelius (1865-1957), and the writers Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910) and August Strindberg (1849-1912), achieved world fame and played a significant role in the rise of modern European art and culture, around the turn of the century.<sup>1</sup>

In histories of Scandinavian literature, this phase of reorientation and transformation is often called the period of the ‘Modern Breakthrough’ and is sometimes even referred to as the ‘Nordic Renaissance’. An important impetus behind this powerful develop-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf.: Fischer, *Fin de siècle*, 1978, p. 24-47. See also: Bradbury & McFarlane, *Modernism*, 1985, p. 42-43.

ment and of the literary and cultural interaction between Europe and the North was the Danish critic Georg Brandes (1842-1927).

Brandes began a vehement campaign against the dominance of outdated bourgeois romanticism in Scandinavian cultural life around the year 1870. He inspired many Scandinavian writers who, at least for a while, followed the artistic ideals he proclaimed, and he introduced these Scandinavians around Europe. Thus, the impact of Brandes' attempt to modernise literature was felt inside, as well as outside of Scandinavia.<sup>2</sup>

In the course of the twentieth century, Scandinavian scholarship has assessed Brandes as one of the founders of modern literary criticism, in the academic sense, as well as in the broader, journalistic, meaning of the word. Thus, it is not surprising that a lot of research still is devoted to Brandes, and that one of the most voluminous biographies written in Denmark in recent years, was about Brandes. The appearance of the last volumes of this multi-volume work, written by Jørgen Knudsen, *Georg Brandes. Uovervindelig taber (1914-27)* I-II, is the immediate cause for this essay.<sup>3</sup>

Knudsen began writing about Brandes in the early 1980, and there is a gap of nearly twenty years between the first volume of his biography, and the project's completion. In this period fundamental changes have taken place in Danish society and scholarship, as well as in the assessment of Georg Brandes. The latter is in part caused by the new ground Knudsen has broken in offering us a fuller understanding of Brandes' life and work. Since 1985, when Knudsen's first volume appeared, the academic and cultural climate

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<sup>2</sup> See for a case-study: Bjørn Andersen, *Stemmen udefra*, 1989 on the reception of Brandes in Hungary.

<sup>3</sup> Jørgen Knudsen's project consists of the following volumes, *Georg Brandes. Frigørelsens vej 1842-77* (1985); *Georg Brandes. I modsigelsesens tegn 1877-83* (1988); *Georg Brandes. Symbolet og manden 1883-95* I-II (1994); *Georg Brandes. Magt og afmagt 1896-1914* I-II (1998), and: *Georg Brandes. Uovervindelig taber 1914-27* I-II (2004). All volumes are published by Gyldendal in Copenhagen.

has changed too, and, more important, the recent neoconservative renaissance in politics is also reflected in the way Brandes is perceived today – in academia, as well as in public opinion.

Georg Brandes was among the most productive and influential Scandinavian cultural personalities of his time, and in this essay, I will focus on the fact that Brandes was not only a source of inspiration for Scandinavian writers but that he was also an important intermediary between Scandinavian and European belles-lettres, acting, so to speak, in two directions. At first, Brandes introduced contemporary currents in European culture into the northern countries; then, he functioned as one of the main advocates of Scandinavian literature throughout Europe, and, finally, he became a truly cosmopolitan, European, cultural personality. Nevertheless, soon after his death he fell largely into oblivion, and today his name only lives on in northern Europe.

This essay seeks to give an impression of this remarkable personality and his achievements. It is also remarkable that Brandes, and the tradition of humanism and internationalism he represents, in recent years has been challenged by conservative trends in the political arena as well as in academic circles. And those who express their affinity to his ideological heritage, are forced to explain – or even excuse – their interest in Brandes publicly.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, one of the underlying aims of this essay is to look at Brandes' role from 'the outside' i.e. from an international perspective.

## Between Scandinavia and Europe

Georg Brandes was born in Copenhagen in 1842, in a Jewish

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<sup>4</sup> Merely as an example of this tendency, I would like to mention Carl Erik Bay's foreword to his learned and interesting collection of essays *Kulturradikale kapitler fra Georg Brandes til Otto Gelsted* (2003).

middle-class family. He was the oldest of three brothers, and just as his younger brother, Edvard (1847-1931),<sup>5</sup> he was able to graduate from the University of Copenhagen and receive a doctorate at a relatively young age. Georg and Edvard Brandes were doubtless among the brightest young men of their generation.

In 1866, Georg made his first extensive journey abroad, and numerous travels followed in the years ahead. In 1866 his destination was Paris,<sup>6</sup> the city, with its abundance of theatres, museums, libraries and artists, which offered him all the aesthetical experiences he had longed for in the rather dull and backward cultural life of contemporary Copenhagen.

During this journey, Brandes came to understand that Denmark – and in effect most of Scandinavia – no longer was in touch with the main currents in European culture. Socially, aesthetically and politically Scandinavia lagged behind, and Brandes decided, with the boldness and bravura of a youngster, that he himself would be just the man to bridge the gap between the romantic era of the first half of the nineteenth century and the spirit of modernity, as he witnessed it during his stay in Paris. It was quite a daring and ambitious statement for such a young man, to declare that Scandinavian society lagged some forty years behind the rest of Europe. The more so, as Brandes saw it as a kind of quest – a quasi-religious assignment of self-sacrifice – to introduce the latest in modern literary and cultural criticism in the North.

One of the most important learning-experiences during Brandes' stay in Paris were the lectures he attended given by Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893) and others at the University of Paris. Taine's ideas on the interrelationship between cultural forms of

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<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive biography of Edvard Brandes, see: Hvidt, *Edvard Brandes*, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Cf.: Knudsen, *Georg Brandes. Frigørelsens vej*, 1985, p. 94-108. Letters by Brandes, concerning this important journey, can be found in: Brandes, *Breve til Forældrene 1859-71*, Vol. I, p. 88-182.

expression – including literary works – and their historical context, made an especially deep impression on him. Brandes read Taine's *L'histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1864), and even paid a private visit to the author in Paris.<sup>7</sup> Later Brandes declared that the philosophy of Taine was the primary source of his own intellectual awakening, which led to his breakthrough as an independent thinker in the early 1870's. Like Taine, the young Brandes saw historical development as a kind of social psychology. That is, the life of individual people, as well as that of entire nations, could be understood on the basis of three fundamental determining factors, which were labelled: 'race', 'moment' and 'milieu'.

Taine's historical positivism was used in practical criticism by a number of other scholars and critics, such as Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804-1869). Brandes, just as Sainte-Beuve, was primarily interested in the individual and its ways of finding unique modes of expression. From the very beginning of his career, Brandes was more interested in the spirit and 'psychology' of a society than in a purely sociological approach.

Thus, Taine and Sainte-Beuve were of immense importance to Brandes' intellectual development and he introduced their empirical method in Denmark in the mid 1860's. Brandes' early essays, such as the ones on Ibsen's play *Brand* – from 1867 – and on Hans Christian Andersen – from 1869 – were clearly written under the direct influence of Taine's and Sainte-Beuve's critical method.<sup>8</sup> Brandes approached his objects of study in such a way that life and work of the respective authors were closely linked together and illustrated each other. The texts he studied were treated as expressions of the circumstances under which they were produced, reflecting general historical and social conditions as well as taking

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<sup>7</sup> Cf.: Brandes, *Breve til Hjemmet*, 1938, p. 25-26, 30-31.

<sup>8</sup> See for later versions: Brandes, *Samlede Skrifter III*, 1900, p. 239-272, and *Samlede Skrifter II*, 1899, p. 91-132.

the individual author's private background into account.

How deeply Brandes was influenced by Taine's philosophical notions and method is evident too from the fact that Brandes wrote his doctoral thesis on Taine. This work, *Den franske Æstetik i vore Dage* (Contemporary French Aesthetics), was defended in 1869 and published in 1870.

Although Brandes was clearly a disciple of Taine, he criticised some aspects of Taine's approach. There was especially one aspect in Taine which attracted Brandes' attention and which he discussed at length: Taine's idea concerning the role of the genius in the course of historical processes. For Taine the *genius* – i.e. the creative *Einzelgänger*, who, in opposition to the majority of his contemporaries, was able to change the course of history and cultural development – was the focal-point of the prime forces that he saw at work in history. For Brandes however, the genius was not merely one of the sources of cultural renewal: for him, the genius often was a kind of martyr fighting against suffocating mainstream thinking and dogmatism. Although Taine was Brandes' intellectual source of inspiration, he shaped his own version of Taine's method of reasoning, by avoiding the latent mechanical determinism in Taine's thought. For most of his life, Brandes would keep working on the idea of the 'great' individual, or genius, as a unique source of cultural progress and innovation. This explains, in part how Brandes saw himself, and why he evinced Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844-1900) ideas with enthusiasm.

After receiving his doctorate, Brandes asked himself what the consequences of the new positivist approach were for contemporary Danish and Scandinavian literature. Aesthetics had lost contact with everyday reality, and the distance between the two had to be bridged. Romanticism and Hegelian aesthetics, which had reached Scandinavia relatively late, were, in the middle of the nineteenth century, rooted firmly in northern Europe. Now Brandes declared that idealist aesthetics were dead and gone, and

that the time had come for a new kind of art and literature, which would be based on 'real' issues, instead of dealing with abstract idealist notions. In Brandes' view, reality had to be at the core of modern literature, and one of these 'real' issues which he had become aware of was the relationship between the sexes. This meant, that he strongly criticized the out-dated bourgeois morality of his day, which produced and perpetuated social injustice and inequality between men and women. No wonder that when Brandes, in 1869, came across John Stuart Mill's (1806-1873) *The Subjection of Women* (1869), he was caught by the book and instantly translated it into Danish. At this early stage in Brandes' life, one can already see some of the contours and dilemmas of his career.

Brandes had a unique gift of effectively grasping and understanding the central tendencies in the cultural development of his time. When he learned about Taine and later about John Stuart Mill, he saw at once that they offered answers to problems that were broadly discussed in the circles of policy-makers and the cultural elite in general. Brandes took the pulse of his own time and was in many ways ahead of his contemporaries in focusing on issues that really mattered. He paired his fine sensitivity for issues with an impressive intellectual mobility and understanding of how social networks operate. Brandes was a prolific and extremely epistolary writer, helping him to maintain – and use – an enormous infrastructure of friends and acquaintances effectively. Brandes wrote thousands and thousands of letters, and as Jørgen Knudsen estimates, he "received at least a quarter of a million letters".<sup>9</sup> His personal network transgressed cultural borderlines and reached across political boundaries. In this sense, his origin as a Dane did not hinder him from acting in a wide range of international

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<sup>9</sup> Jørgen Knudsen, "I too believe in the good effect of hypnosis": Georg Brandes and his Correspondence', in: Michael Robinson and Janet Garton (eds.), *Nordic Letters 1870-1910*, 1999, p. 66.

contexts. Brandes was simply perceived as an individual who did not act on behalf of a nation or a political party: he acted and was seen as an internationally-oriented intellectual.

While the population of Paris in 1870 prepared for the defence of their city, Brandes studied the state of affairs in contemporary French literature and an idea for a book started to shape itself in his mind. This work, which later became known as *Hovedstrømninger i det nittende Aarhundredes Litteratur* (Main Currents in Nineteenth-Century Literature), was Brandes' ambitious six-volume magnum opus. Its publication began in 1872 and finished nearly twenty years later, in 1890. The goal of this huge project was to compare recent developments in European literature with the situation in Scandinavia and, eventually, to stimulate and vitalise the Scandinavian literature of his own time.

On November 3, 1871, the young and promising academic Georg Brandes, began a series of lectures at Copenhagen University. His aim with these lectures was to introduce developments in contemporary French, English and German literature, art and philosophy to the Danish, and in a wider sense, the Scandinavian public.<sup>10</sup>

In the first volume of *Main Currents in Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Brandes announced the central and quintessential idea, that truly modern literature had to focus on the problems of society, or, as he put it in Danish: "Det at en Litteratur i vore Dage lever, viser sig i, at den sætter Problemer under Debat".<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In the course of his lectures, Brandes introduced and discussed – just to name some of the contemporary French writers – Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, the Goncourt Brothers, Théophile Gautier, Victor Hugo, Guy de Maupassant, Prosper Mérimée, Ernest Renan, George Sand, Stendhal, Emile Zola, and a number of others. Similar lists could be given of German and English authors.

<sup>11</sup> Brandes, *Samlede Skrifter IV*, 1900, p. 5. English translation: "What shows a literature to be a living thing today is the fact of its subjecting problems to



The problems, or social issues, Brandes meant were: social inequality of the sexes, double-standards in matrimonial morality for men and women, matters concerning social injustice and, last but not least, the role of religion in contemporary society. Only when literature would be able to address issues of this kind would literature survive as a medium, and as a valuable source of intellectual reflection.

### The aftermath of 1864

Notwithstanding the radical changes that had manifested themselves in European culture, philosophy and politics in the aftermath of the year 1848, in Scandinavia the ruling elites and the culture that represented their world-view, remained in charge until 1864. As a result of the fundamental shock of losing the war against Prussia, some Danish politicians and cultural personalities began to understand that a new era had begun. One important thing that was about to change was the ideological impact of the so-called 'Scandinavian Movement' or 'Scandinavianism'. This movement among students and intellectuals basically ceased to exist when the Danes did not receive the military aid from Sweden and Norway they had hoped for in 1864. From then on, nationalism became an increasingly important factor in the process of nation-building and in the adjustment of the identities of the Northern countries to the new geo-political situation.

The 1864-war, which, in part, must be judged as a Danish internal conflict, perhaps even as a civil war,<sup>12</sup> came as a shock to the cultural and politic elite. The loss of vast and crucial territory to Prussia – and the end of the country's status in the Baltic region as an important political power – were hard to swallow, and lead to an

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debate", in: Bradbury & McFarlane, *Modernism*, 1985, p. 500.

<sup>12</sup> Cf.: Mørch, *Den sidste Danmarkshistorie*, 1996, p. 113-129.

internal rearrangement of Danish society and (foreign) politics.

From a political point of view, Brandes was a strong supporter of the idea of 'Scandinavianism'. In his judgement, the Scandinavian countries were too small to play any role of importance in the future. The political future of Europe would probably be built either on fierce political competition between a few strong nation-states supported by strong nationalist sentiments, or on a truly internationalist political power based on the hegemony of the working-classes. Brandes was not in favour of either of these alternatives. He was much in favour of a strong Nordic cultural and political co-operation which would make it possible for the Scandinavian countries to play a more significant role in Europe, especially if this Nordic unity would team-up with the Anglo-Saxon world.

It is quite interesting that Brandes strongly opposed nationalist tendencies but, at the same time, could not fully accept internationalism – i.e. socialism – either. If we look at Brandes' ideas and the ideological choices that he made during his life, it is quite clear that he was never an admirer of liberalism, nor of democratic institutions such as parliamentarianism. He was certainly sympathetic to the less-fortunate classes in society, but he detested the idea of majorities that could decide on crucial political and social issues.

In the aftermath of the 1864 catastrophe, another severe revolutionary force manifested itself: modern industrialisation made its way to the Northern countries. The late 1860's were therefore a relatively short span of time in which an unprecedented amount of social change happened, reshaping the social, economic and geographical structures of the Scandinavian countries, turning them into the industrialised and modern societies, much as we know them today.<sup>13</sup> Technological innovation, new means of

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<sup>13</sup> Ahlström, *Det moderna genombrottet*, 1974, p. 19-41.

communication, new cityscapes and social classes that inhabited them, developed rapidly. Just as elsewhere in Europe the problems of rapid and uncontrolled urbanisation rapidly expanded in Scandinavia when they were introduced in the wake of modern capitalism and free enterprise. Old, stable social patterns and moral values were questioned and the security they had offered earlier was rendered unstable, and millions of Scandinavians were forced to emigrate.

Brandes' lectures at Copenhagen University coincided with the end of the Franco-German war of 1870-1871, which caused violent revolutionary turmoil throughout France. It was as if and the revolutionary turmoil in France also could be registered in Scandinavia and now, suddenly, the belated social and cultural change of some twenty years earlier became tangible. But the Copenhagen bourgeoisie was not pleased with the stir that young Brandes raised, and an appointment as a university professor, a post for which he was the most obvious candidate, was given to someone else. Now Brandes decided to move to Berlin.<sup>14</sup>

Brandes was an active and restless traveller all his life. Immediately after the first lecture on *Main Currents* in 1871, he made a journey to Dresden, where he met with Ibsen again. He continued to Munich, where he was introduced to the author Paul Heyse (1830-1914), and they became close friends. This pattern recurred every time Brandes was abroad: he met new friends, kept in contact with them and was introduced into their social circles. In

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<sup>14</sup> In the mean time Brandes had married his (second) wife, Johanne Louise Henriette Steinhof (1845-1931), who was German, a circumstance which made it much easier for Brandes to make a living in Germany as a writer. Because his wife also had a wide range contacts with influential cultural personalities, Brandes soon became a celebrity himself. People like Theodor Mommsen (1817-1903), Friedrich Spielhagen (1829-1911), Berthold Auerbach (1812-1882) and the painter Max Klinger (1857-1920), became close friends of the Brandeses.

these salon-like milieus, he came in contact with important figures from the world of science, art and politics. Thus, already at an early age, Brandes came to know a number of people who shaped the face of the second half of the nineteenth century.

Between 1877 and 1883, Brandes lived in Berlin, and soon after his arrival there, he primarily functioned, and was perceived, as a German writer, rather than as a Dane.<sup>15</sup> During the years of his German 'exile', Brandes worked on a number of books, among them a political biography of *Benjamin Disraeli* (1878) and one on *Ferdinand Lasalle* (1881).

Brandes returned to Copenhagen in 1883 where, immediately after his arrival, his epochal book *Det moderne Gjennembruds Mænd* (Men of the Modern Breakthrough) appeared. This is a collection of essays on the central authors of the 'new' Scandinavian literature who had appeared in the decade since he had given his first public lecture on *Main Currents*. In this book, there are portraits of among others, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Jens Peter Jacobsen (1847-1885), Henrik Ibsen and his own brother, Edvard.

If we want to understand how Brandes could become such a central person in late nineteenth-century European cultural life, we may take a look at his two journeys to Poland. In 1885, he made a long tour, lecturing all over Germany, Austria and Poland. Brandes had established an especially warm relationship with the Polish people, who suffered from Russian and German oppression.<sup>16</sup> Of course Polish nationalists and intellectuals gave Brandes a most warm welcome when he visited their country. He returned to Warsaw a year later, and this time, he even lectured on Polish literature, which was close to a provocation in the eyes of the Russian authorities. It is interesting to note that Brandes could not

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<sup>15</sup> Cf.: Bradbury & McFarlane, *Modernism*, 1985, p. 116.

<sup>16</sup> See for Brandes' impressions from Poland and Russia: Brandes, *Samlede Skrifter X*, 1902, p. 1-287, 293-548.

read any of the Slavic languages and that he entirely had to rely on translations. But, nevertheless, Brandes wrote about Polish writers as Adam Mickiewicz (1797-1855), Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846-1916), and Juliusz Słowacki (1809-1849), as well as on the Russian authors Fjodor Dostojewskij (1821-1881), Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852), Michail Lermontov (1814-1841), Alexandr Pusckin (1799-1837), and Iwan Turgenjew (1818-1883). Except for Turgenjew, who already was well known in Scandinavia, some of these authors now appeared in Scandinavian translations for the first time. Brandes not only introduced these writers in northern Europe, he also lectured on contemporary French, English, German and Scandinavian literature in Russia and Poland and, thus, paved the way for many of them in the East. Ibsen, Bjørnson, Jacobsen all became known in Poland and Russia through the lectures, articles and books of Brandes.

The central issue for Brandes was that he learned to understand the 'soul' of both Poland and Russia through literature. To him, literary texts, so to speak, were the most intense and precise expressions of the difference between one country and another, reflecting the conditions of the natural habitat of people(s) through literary texts. Still, Taine's and Sainte-Beuve's approach was very much alive in Brandes' way of reasoning. In this method probably lies part of the answer to the question of why Brandes was so successful and why he was perceived as a cosmopolitan thinker, rather than as a Dane or a German. He found a unique synthesis between the individual and the social reality in which he functions. Furthermore, Brandes never fell for the doubtful charms of populist nationalism, not even when he knew that his reputation would suffer from the stance he took.<sup>17</sup> This became clear, for example after World War I, when he criticised the French for the harsh terms of the Versailles peace-treaty.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf.: Hansen, *Georg Brandes*, 1918, p. 170-174.

At the same time Brandes was sympathetic towards national minorities, people who were suppressed and had lost their cultural independence as a result of the centripetal tendencies of the modern nation-state. The situation of the Flemish, Finns, Norwegians, Poles, Armenians and many others appealed to him, and often found in him a warm supporter of their causes.<sup>18</sup> This goes as well for cases in which injustice was inflicted on individuals, such as the unjustly prosecuted Albert Dreyfus.<sup>19</sup>

### Nietzsche

As mentioned earlier, Brandes had an extreme, almost seismographic, sensitivity for new currents in intellectual life. In 1887, he came across Friedrich Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, which had been published earlier that year and he immediately gave a series of lectures on Nietzsche and his work. Brandes will be remembered as the first major critic who understood the importance of Nietzsche. On the other hand, Nietzsche was of great value to Brandes as well, because Nietzsche's writings stimulated Brandes to formulate his own ideas about the solitary genius as the main source of inspiration for the development of culture, in a more precise way. Brandes found in Nietzsche the arguments he had been looking for to criticise Stuart Mill's utilitarian morality and Mill's tendency towards more liberal and democratic social institutions. Nietzsche, as well as Brandes, favoured the morality of the few, the strong and solitary genius; arguing in favour of the 'aristocracy of the mind' – or *Herren-Moral*

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<sup>18</sup> See for a number of articles on these, and related 'oppressed' peoples: Brandes, *Samlede Skrifter XVII*, 1906, p. 3-94.

<sup>19</sup> See for a comprehensive study and a collection of relevant articles by Brandes: Stender Clausen, *Georg Brandes og Dreyfusaffæren*, 1994.

– rather than accepting the dominance of the ‘uncivilized’ masses.<sup>20</sup>

In Brandes’ small, but crucial, essay entitled ‘*Aristokratisk Radikalisme*’ (Aristocratic radicalism), from 1889, it becomes evident how closely-related Nietzsche’s thinking was to Brandes’ own.<sup>21</sup> Later, he expanded his ideas in the book *Det store Menneske, Kulturens Kilde* (The Great Human Being: a Source of Culture).

That Brandes had long nurtured fundamental sympathies for the ‘strong’ genius in opposition to the main-stream currents of his time is no surprise. Partly, this concept harmonised with his self-esteem and the way he judged his own career. The cult of the ‘genius’ is present in all of Brandes’ writings, right from the very beginning. And, not surprisingly, Brandes wrote biographical essays on a number of unique personalities who had changed the course of history, among others Bismarck, and voluminous works on Benjamin Disraeli (1878) and Ferdinand Lasalle (1881). Later he also wrote monumental works about William Shakespeare (1895-96), Wolfgang Goethe (1914-15), Julius Caesar (1918), Michelangelo (1921) and Homer (1922).

One of the political facts of the last years of Brandes’ life was the outbreak of the World War I, which shocked him deeply. The immense bloodshed and loss of lives and the mechanical mass-murder committed in the name of nationalism and run-away militarism offended him deeply: he wondered what the new century would bring, when the battle of ideas and the competition of the mind, was replaced by the harsh reality of the battle-field. Civilisation seemed to have lost in the new century. The First World War showed what would happen if the masses of Europe would take control: they would fight each other and everything would be drowned in mass-destruction and pure brutality.

In the years after the First World War Brandes did not complete

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<sup>20</sup> Cf.: Bradbury & McFarlane, *Modernism*, 1985, p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> Cf.: Brandes, *Samlede Skrifter VII*, 1901, p. 596-644.

any great works, he travelled, gave lectures and his circle of friends and acquaintances kept growing.<sup>22</sup>

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Brandes was a 'loner', he never really sympathised with the most potent international movement of the later half of the nineteenth century – socialism – neither did he support its counterpart, nationalism. Right from the beginning of his career, Brandes was an elitist thinker. But he also was a cosmopolitan, a European with an open mind, and always at the look-out for new intellectual impulses and movements.

A precise and comprehensive assessment of Brandes' role in Scandinavian and European literature has been given by Niels Ingwersen, who wrote in his contribution to *A History of Danish Literature* (1992):

Brandes [...] was - with all the positive and negative connotations that cluster around that term – a cultural forcefield. No other Scandinavian critic has achieved his international reputation.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, I would argue, that Brandes' enormous influence depended, among other things, on the fact that he was aware of the significance of the modern press and made use of it. He wrote countless articles, travel reports, reviews, essays in newspapers. Often, his articles appeared abroad in uncontrollable numbers of translations.

It would nevertheless be a false assumption to see Georg

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<sup>22</sup> Among others he met Sigmund Freud, Arthur Schnitzler, Max Reinhardt, and, in Copenhagen, Brandes was visited by the Nobel-prize winner Rabindranath Tagore and the American president Warren Harding, as well as many other celebrities.

<sup>23</sup> Rossel (ed.), *A History of Danish Literature*, 1992, p. 264.



Brandes as the sole driving-force behind the modernisation of Scandinavian literature in the last thirty years of the nineteenth century. Brandes truly was a 'communicator' though his reputation as a solid scholar has always been doubtful, as a mediator, a cultural institution in his own right, he was unparalleled. No one else has had the same impact in this crucial phase in the development of European modern cultural identity as Brandes. He dominated a period stretching from the end of the Franco-German war in 1871 to the end of the Great War in 1918.

The present debate on Brandes' literary and political heritage in Denmark is – whatever the outcome may be – still a token of his enduring significance. Jørgen Knudsen's monumental biography of Brandes is part of that debate, and hopefully it will help to give Brandes his rightful place in European cultural history.

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