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**'Til H. Ibsen', a poem by Georg Brandes: A Prologue to the Copenhagen Lectures?**

## 'Til H. Ibsen', a poem by Georg Brandes: a prologue to the Copenhagen lectures?

The principle division in the history of Western literature occurs between the early 1870s and the turn of the century...Compared to this division all preceding historical and stylistic rubrics or movements - Hellenism, the medieval, the Baroque, Neo-classicism, Romanticism - are only subgroups or variants.

George Steiner

### Introduction

When Georg Brandes began his series of lectures at the University of Copenhagen in November 1871, little did he realise the impact that his words would have. Apart from setting his home town astir with his diatribes against such venerable institutions as marriage, the Church and Copenhagen high society, Brandes' lectures were also to have a massive impact on writers across Scandinavia. His clarion call to them to make literature more contemporary, or 'of our time', was enthusiastically taken up by writers such as Pontoppidan, Ibsen, Bjørnson, and Strindberg and in many ways was the foundation upon which *det moderne Gennembrud*, or "modern breakthrough" was founded. "That literature lives in our time," Brandes proclaimed, "is demonstrated by the fact that it takes up problems for debate".<sup>1</sup> The sort of relatively radical free thinking featured in the lectures could hardly have been publicly espoused at a worse time in Danish history, particularly as Brandes was holding up post-Enlightenment France as the ideal to emulate. Just one year previously, Denmark had almost drawn the unthinkable upon itself by coming close to lending its military support to the losing French side in the Franco-Prussian war. Furthermore, any such revolutionary posturing was anathema to the Danish establishment in the wake of the Paris *Commune*. Consequently, in the process of attempting to usher in a new wave in Scandinavian writing, Brandes himself became a problem taken up for debate, and a rather one-sided debate at that. His controversial lecture series had rendered him *persona non grata* amongst the newspapers and journals of his home town, and Brandes found himself effectively silenced by the press. The irony of the outraged reaction of Copenhagen society to what he had to say about its provincial, close-minded and theocratic nature was that, as Gibbons points out, it "was itself evidence that his main contention had been correct."<sup>2</sup>

The focus of this essay, however, is not so much the lectures themselves nor their local and wider legacies, but the idea process that led Brandes to take to the lectern as he did. Although Brandes longed for a major social and literary reform, he originally had not envisaged himself as the one who would spearhead such a campaign, yet that is exactly what he went on to do. Thus it is this progression from the moment of realisation that he should join in the struggle for change to being the one to take up the mantle of agitator for change that I intend to extrapolate. In an effort to trace this consolidation of his decision to participate in the drive for social change across Europe and his rise to prominence in that movement, I shall divide the investigation into three. Taking as my starting point a poem Brandes wrote from his hospital bed in response to an exhilarating letter he had received from Henrik Ibsen, in which the Norwegian had urged him to be the one to champion their joint cause, I will demonstrate how this poem in many ways marks a stiffening of Brandes' resolve, but also a reiteration of his desire for a sideline position. Although many critics have taken Ibsen's letter and Brandes' response as the defining moment in his decision to move from a man who watched things happen to a man who made things happen, Ibsen was by no means the sole influence in this matter. The next step in the discussion will thus be a retrospective one, looking back from the moment of decision to Brandes' inspirational encounters with Taine, Renan and John Stuart Mill in Paris during the summer of 1870. The third part of my argument will focus on events as they unfolded upon his return to Copenhagen. Specifically I shall focus on Brandes' choice of a lecture series as the medium for communication of his revolutionary ideas, and also the change of heart that led to him being the one to draw the wrath of the old guard upon himself by moving to centre stage in the call for change,

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<sup>1</sup> Nolin, p.37

<sup>2</sup> Gibbons, p. 117

rather than merely watching from the wings as someone else stirred the audience into action.

### A letter from Ibsen and a reply

While travelling in Italy in 1870-71, Brandes was taken seriously ill with typhus. The gravity of his condition, combined with incompetent medical treatment, necessitated long periods of bedrest in a hospital in Rome. Such confinement was torturous for a peripatetic soul like Brandes, and to pass the long hours of his convalescence, he took to conducting a copious correspondence from his hospital bed. One such letter was written to his mother at precisely 12.30pm on the afternoon of January 10th 1871. "Min sødeste Moder!" he writes: "Det gaaer ikke rigtig godt for mig med at sove om Natten. Inat f. Ex. kunde jeg kun sove fra 2-5. Jeg benyttede da den utaalelige Søvnløshed til at digte følgende Vers til H. Ibsen (som jeg naturligvis ikke agter at sende ham) men som jeg finder ret kjønt."<sup>3</sup> Brandes and Ibsen had enjoyed an intermittent correspondence since 1866, when Ibsen had begun to rise to prominence following the publication of *Brand*. Ibsen had in fact just written to Brandes the week before, wishing him a speedy recovery, but also offering him a word or two of advice. Although Brandes' letters to Ibsen have been lost, Ibsen's rhetorical letter writing style gives the reader an insight into the nature of the missing half of the correspondence. It seems likely that Brandes had asked the Norwegian for advice on what he should do in life. Ibsen initially counsels Brandes to leave such thoughts aside in order to expedite his recovery, but portentously goes on to say: "Og når De så er bleven stærk og dygtig igjen, hvad skal De så gjøre? Jo, da skal De gjøre, hvad De må gjøre. En natur som Deres vælger ikke."<sup>4</sup> It is the concluding paragraph of this letter, however, that proved particularly inspirational to Brandes:

Verdensbegivenheder optager for øvrigt en stor del af mine tanker. Det gamle illusoriske Frankrig er slået istykker; når nu også det nye faktiske Preussen er slået istykker, så er vi med et spring inde i en vordende tidsalder. Hej, hvor ideerne da vil ramle rundt omkring os! Og det kan sandelig også være på tiden. Alt det vi til dato lever på, er jo dog kun smulerne fra revolutionsbordet i forrige århundrede, og den kost er jo dog nu længe nok tygget og tygget om igjen. Begreberne trænger til et nyt indhold og en ny forklaring. Frihed, lighed og broderskab er ikke længere de samme ting, som de var i salig Guillotins dage. Dette er det, som politikerne ikke vil forstå, og derfor hader jeg dem. De mennesker vil kun specialrevolutioner, revolutioner i det ydre, i det politiske o. s. v. Men alt slikt er pilleri. Hvad det gjælder er menneskeåndens revolter, og der skal De være en af dem, som går i spidsen. Men først skal De få feberen fra halsen.<sup>5</sup>

Ibsen's polemical writing was music to Brandes' ears. McFarlane writes that: "Brandes later confessed that Ibsen's words had touched his most secret hopes, set his imagination aflame. He felt he had at last, after a period of cruel isolation, found a comrade in arms."<sup>6</sup> Brandes' interim riposte to the food for thought provided by Ibsen was the poem he mentioned in the above cited letter to his mother. This private poem, which Brandes himself later derided as typhus poetry, has not been critically acclaimed, but it is significant as an insight into Brandes' ruminations of the time. Of particular interest are the first and last verse of four. The opening stanza seems to reiterate Brandes' previous prevarication with regard to his life goals, and the newfound sense of purpose Ibsen's letter to him has triggered:

Ja, jeg var ung, da jeg efter en lang,  
Pinlig og trøsteløs Tvivlen og Vaklen  
Modtog af Aanderne pludselig Faklen  
Der for bestandig vil lede min Gang,  
Klart da jeg saa ved dens straalende Flamme:  
?Magter, der baste

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<sup>3</sup> Borup, p.14

<sup>4</sup> Bull, p.203

<sup>5</sup> Bull, p.204

<sup>6</sup> McFarlane, p.349

Forskning og Tanke,  
Magter, der kaste  
For Friheden Skranke  
Den vil al Løgnens Forbandelse ramme,  
*Sandhed og Frihed er Eet og det Samme.*<sup>7</sup>

Also apparent, from the first few lines of the last verse, is Brandes' delight at having found a comrade in arms, but also his willingness to be led, rather than to lead, in the struggle ahead:

Broder! jeg fandt Dig. Hvad gjør det mig vel,  
At Du en Høvedsmand er uden Lige,  
Mens jeg blev skabt til som Væbner at krige,  
Sammen vi høre med hele vor Sjæl.<sup>8</sup>

McFarlane picks up on this latter point in his discussion of the poem:

What Brandes found himself looking for above all from Ibsen, therefore, was a lead. he had naturally been greatly flattered when Ibsen had written to him as one of those who would be marching at the head of the 'revolution of the human spirit'; but although the thought of playing such a role exercised on him an immense appeal - ever since reading Kierkegaard as a young man he had dreamed of enjoying some exquisite martyrdom in the cause of truth - he suffered an agony of uncertainty about his own innate capacity for achieving this kind of politico-cultural success. He yearned to play the part of some great captain of culture, but - as the poem of homage to Ibsen so readily betrays - he suspected that a more subordinate or supporting role was one more suited to his talents.<sup>9</sup>

While Brandes may well have been prepared to be an 'equerry' to Ibsen as a 'captain without equal',<sup>10</sup> Ibsen on the other hand was not only uninterested in leading their joint plan of action, he eschewed involvement in any kind of group endeavour, whatever the purpose. John Donne may well have written that no man is an island, but to Ibsen this was the ideal state of being. "Friends are an expensive luxury;" Ibsen wrote to him, "and when a man has invested his capital in a calling and a mission in life, he simply cannot afford to keep friends."<sup>11</sup> It was their meeting in Dresden on Brandes' return journey to Denmark that first gave the Dane cause to reconsider his dependence on Ibsen to be at the forefront of a press for change. While Ibsen literally welcomed Brandes with open arms, the meeting was somewhat of a letdown for him. Ibsen was not as radically inclined in real life as he had appeared on paper, and Brandes also remarked that: "Friendly though Ibsen was, and always is, towards me, I am too superior to him in education to get any value out of long conversations with him."<sup>12</sup> For his part, Ibsen downplayed any perceived role for himself in Brandes' plan of action, encouraging the Dane to take the lead role himself. Indeed, his parting remark to Brandes was "You go and stir up the Danes, I will stir up the Norwegians."<sup>13</sup>

### **Other encounters and influences**

Brandes was one Dane that Ibsen had himself stirred up, but Ibsen was only one influential character that Brandes encountered on his extended European travels. While it was the Norwegian who may well have

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<sup>7</sup> Borup, p. 14

<sup>8</sup> Borup, p. 15

<sup>9</sup> McFarlane, p. 354

<sup>10</sup> McFarlane, p. 347

<sup>11</sup> McFarlane, p. 360

<sup>12</sup> McFarlane, p. 360

<sup>13</sup> McFarlane, p. 349

spurred him into action, in terms of the nature of his ideas, it is arguably the contacts he made in Paris that were to have a greater impact on Brandes' ideology. Hippolyte Taine, a professor at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, had been the subject of Brandes' doctoral dissertation at the University of Copenhagen and the Frenchman happily received Brandes at his home during the latter's visit to Paris in the summer of 1870. Taine also introduced Brandes to Ernest Renan, philologist, religious historian, philosopher and former professor at the College de France, whose forced frugal existence took Brandes by surprise. Nolin notes that "Renan lived in very poor circumstances since he had lost his professorship at the College de France because of his outspokenness with regard to religious questions. Renan was one of the "free spirits" who chose to swim against the current, and he would not sell his opinions for the sake of a job. This was the path that Brandes himself would follow."<sup>14</sup> But, as was the case with his encounter with Ibsen in Dresden, meeting Taine and Renan was also a disappointment for Brandes, in the context of his search for a leader for his desired movement: As Nolin writes, as much as Brandes had enjoyed his time with Taine and Renan, they "seemed to him men of theory, without any real contact with the practical side of life, and as such temperamentally quite unsuited to the kind of public role he himself set such high value on. Direct individual action, apart from what could be achieved obliquely by the printed word, was something quite alien to the two French thinkers; personal intervention in determining the course of events was no part of their ambition."<sup>15</sup> In terms of finding a role model for carrying thought over into deed, it was someone Brandes met in Paris quite by chance that was to fulfil that role. Brandes recorded the meeting thus:

I opened the door and outside stood a tall, thin, elderly man in a long black coat buttoned at the waist. 'Come in,' I said without looking at him any more closely and went for my wallet. But the man remained standing where he was and, taking off his hat, said my name uncertainly. "That's correct," I said, and before I had a chance to ask a gain, I heard the softly spoken words: "I am Mr. Mill." If he had said he were the king of Portugal, I couldn't have been more surprised.<sup>16</sup>

It was not the watchmaker bringing his watch, as Brandes had initially thought, but the English philosopher John Stuart Mill. Brandes had translated Mill's *The Subjection of Women* into Danish the year before, which led to a correspondence between them, although up to this point they had never met. Upon hearing that his Danish translator was also in Paris, Mill sought him out. This initial impromptu encounter was highly significant for Brandes. "Now," he later wrote while reminiscing about it, "[in Mill] I found embodied within the one man great tenacity allied to the pursuit of ideas. And this had a life-long effect on me."<sup>17</sup> Mill was clearly a breath of fresh air for Brandes. He was different not merely in the sense of being considerably more dynamic, but his philosophical orientation was quite different to that of Brandes. A side trip to England, at Mill's invitation, provided Brandes with an opportunity to discuss their different philosophical leanings in greater depth. The Dane was heavily under the influence of Hegel, which surprised Mill, who confessed to never having read any Hegel, adding that he was only familiar with Hegel's work though English references to it. Brandes inquired as to his opinion of Hegel, and was shocked by Mill's dismissal of Hegelian metaphysics as complete rubbish. Mill in turn asked Brandes if he had understood Hegel's writings, and upon receiving an answer in the affirmative, countered "but is there really anything to understand?"<sup>18</sup> This exchange of ideas between Mill and Brandes was to have a significant impact on the Dane's later ideology. In the words of Nolin: "The orientation of the modern breakthrough toward reality and political life, toward a reformation of society, toward a non-metaphysical view of man, are all in the spirit of Mill. Mill was one of the great innovators of the last century, and perhaps more than anyone else he contributed to the fact that Brandes dropped some of the metaphysical ballast that still remained with him when he began his trip to France and Italy in 1870."

### Copenhagen revisited

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<sup>14</sup> Nolin, p. 32

<sup>15</sup> Nolin, p. 37

<sup>16</sup> Nolin, p. 32

<sup>17</sup> McFarlane, p. 358

<sup>18</sup> Nolin, p. 32

Upon the conclusion of his trip around Europe, Brandes then returned to Copenhagen in July 1871 "sunburned, seething with hatred of orthodox narrow-mindedness, and ready at last to begin the battle for modernity."<sup>19</sup> He devoted himself to reading Mill in greater detail, translating *Utilitarianism* in the process. At first Brandes also made an attempt at philosophical writing, having been much influenced by Mill's rejection of the notion of the soul/ body divide in favour of a non-metaphysical account of personality. He was no philosopher, however, and perspicacious enough to abandon that avenue for the expression of his ideas, while uncertain about how or whether to make those ideas known. Gibbons writes that "Brandes was not sure, at first, exactly how he should go about his assault on the Danish establishment. He was bursting with things to say and unsure of how to say them. After consulting with his mother and with Hans Brøchner, he decided to launch a major lecture series at the University. He spent the late summer and early fall of 1871 preparing to fire this initial shot."<sup>20</sup> What Gibbons does not mention, however, is that as late as September 1871, just a few weeks before the lecture series was to begin, Brandes wrote to Ibsen. Once again, his letter has been lost, but McFarlane explains the probable nature of it thus:

On his return to Copenhagen, Brandes tried to bring things to a point of decision. Possessed by the idea of uttering some great rallying call, of issuing some powerful declaration, of making some gesture that would give focus to the disaffection he and his generation felt, and yet at the same time himself racked with uncertainty, despondency and indecision, Brandes seems to have made a passionate appeal in a letter to Ibsen, urging him to 'raise a banner'.<sup>21</sup>

Ibsen's reply came on September 24th 1871, just five weeks before Brandes gave his introductory lecture. Ibsen eschewed the idea as futile, adding that the play he was working on at the time, *Emperor and Galilean*, which he later considered to be his masterpiece, would serve as a sort of banner.

Og så skulle jeg forsøge på at stikke en fane ud! Ak, kære ven, det blev en historie, som da L. Napoleon gik iland i Boulogne med en ørn på hovedet. Senere, da hans missions time slog, behøvede han ingen ørn. -- Under beskæftigelsen med »Julian« [*Emperor and Galilean*] er jeg på en viss måde bleven fatalist; men dette stykker bliver dog et slags fane.<sup>22</sup>

In the same letter Ibsen also writes the following:

Det forekommer mig som om De nu står i den samme krise som jeg i de dage jeg skred til at skrive »Brand«, og jeg er viss på at også De vil vide at finde det lægemiddel, som driver sygdommet ud af kroppen. En energisk produceren er en fortræffelig kur. Hvad jeg først og fremmest vil ønske Dem er en rigtig fulblods egoisme, der kan drive Dem til at sætte Deres eget som det eneste, der har værd og betydning, og alt andet som ikke eksisterede.<sup>23</sup>

And so it now became clear to Brandes that Ibsen was both categorically uninterested in spearheading the press for change that Brandes so dearly wanted, and also that perhaps Ibsen had greater faith in him than he himself did. "The one thing Ibsen's letter of reply did achieve," writes McFarlane, "was to bring Brandes to the point of personal decision, to confirm him in his own course of action. It helped to persuade him to commit himself to a socially and intellectually provocative series of lectures, which he intended should constitute a *political* act of self-dedication."<sup>24</sup> This was perhaps the last push he needed to overcome his reticence and to declaim the ails of Danish society as he saw them from the lectern of the University of Copenhagen.

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<sup>19</sup> Gibbons, p. 110

<sup>20</sup> Gibbons, p. 111

<sup>21</sup> McFarlane, p. 361

<sup>22</sup> Bull, p. 210

<sup>23</sup> Bull, p. 209-210

<sup>24</sup> McFarlane, p. 362

## Conclusion

To speak of Brandes' earlier poem 'Til H. Ibsen' as a prologue to these Copenhagen lectures is, in a metaphorical sense, rather apt. On a supertextual level, the poem marks a turning point in Brandes' search for purpose in life, and indicates a new concentration of his ideas on the issue of social reform. The text itself sees Brandes idealizing the virtues of Truth and Freedom, which would also feature prominently in his manifesto as expressed in his lecture series. But, as I have shown, the poem also indicates a desire to be led, rather than to lead the movement deemed imperative in this work. Consequently, I have traced the development of Brandes' thoughts on the matter, taking the penning of this poem as my starting point, and the introductory lecture in the series as the coda. Over the course of this essay, I have shown how Ibsen's letter to Brandes in December 1870 set in motion a thought process that led initially to the writing of the poem in question, and ultimately to Brandes mounting the lectern in Copenhagen eleven months later. In the intervening months, I have shown how Brandes drew upon the other encounters and experiences he had had on his travels in the light of his newfound sense of purpose to advance his own position on social and literary reform. Although Taine and Renan intrigued him, and his meeting with Ibsen was a highlight of the trip, it was John Stuart Mill who was the most influential of all in the formulation of his ideology. Yet, in spite of the prominence Brandes afforded to Mill, I have highlighted how it was Ibsen to whom Brandes turned in September 1871, imploring him in a letter to raise a banner for Truth and Freedom. Ibsen chose to raise *Emperor and Galilean* as his banner, and in the wake of Ibsen's reiteration of his desire to forego involvement in any organised campaign, Brandes finally found the mettle to take the initiative to raise his own banner in the form of his famous lecture series. In his lectures, Brandes was again to revert to the principles of Truth and Freedom expressed in his poem 'Til H. Ibsen' as a byline for his attack on what was rotten in the state of Denmark, setting both the shortcomings of Danish society, and himself, under debate in the process.

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