GEORG BRANDES
The telescope of comparative literature

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The activist critic

In 1923 the most important work of the Danish literary critic Georg Brandes (1842–1927), Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature 1–6, saw its sixth Danish edition since its first publication in 1872–90. By 1923 complete translations had appeared in German (two translations), in English, Russian, Japanese and Yiddish, some of them in reprints, while single volumes had been published in French, Czech, Finnish and Polish. After Brandes’ death in 1927 new complete translations came out in Chinese and Spanish as well as reprints of some of the earlier translations. In 1923 Brandes, 80 years old and fully aware of his European, even global, fame, added a short new preface in which he declared his loyalty to the ideas that he had first promulgated fifty years earlier as a young, controversial comparatist.

His debut in 1866 was a sharp pamphlet, The Dualism in Our Most Recent Philosophy [Dualismen i vor nyeste Philosophie], against a leading Danish philosopher, Rasmus Nielsen, who claimed that faith and knowledge can coexist harmoniously as equally important roads to grasping reality, as long as we keep them apart. Brandes disagreed: conflicting ideas about reality can never coexist peacefully. In this pamphlet Brandes the iconoclastic enfant terrible of academia was born, almost always preferring to side with ideas that pitted him against the cultural and academic establishment and its representatives, be they in literary studies, in politics or in the cultural debate of his day.

Already when he first launched the project of Main Currents as a lecture series at the University of Copenhagen in 1871, he had pointed to debate, or rather controversy, as a permanent challenge for critic and poet alike: “That literature is alive today is shown by the fact that it sets up problems for debate” (Hovedstrømninger 1: 18). Critical language must be used to take a stand. In literature itself, however, language, in all its creative multidimensionality, from sound patterns and syntax to larger psychological and thematic structures, exposes the full complexity of ideas in their contrapuntal coexistence with counter-currents, permanently challenging the reader’s world view.

Brandes’ aim was to situate literature at the point where it takes issue with the fundamental and not necessarily reconcilable ideas that shape human life in the
contemporary world, particularly in Europe but also, and with increasing importance for him, in a global milieu. He was especially concerned with the often conflicting connections between a national culture and its transnational context, without which any conception of its local particularity would prove to be an illusion. Any attempt in literature and culture to seal off a local culture from the world at large and deny its complicity with it became subject to his acid attacks. Particularly in his home country, Denmark, he frowned upon the inwardness of nationalism and individual self-sufficiency which were in marked contrast to the critical national and individual self-awareness that he advocated. Literature was the foundation of this project and comparative studies was its tool:

The comparative approach to literature has a dual nature: its brings us closer to what is foreign to us in such a way that we can appropriate it, and at the same time distances us from what is familiar to us so that we can survey it. One never clearly observes what is right in front of our eyes nor what is too distant. The academic study of literature hands us a telescope: one end magnifies, the other reduces. The heart of the matter is to use it in such a way that we can make up for the illusions of immediate perception. 

(Hovedstrømninger 1: 14)

The basic ideas and their critical practice

Brandes was an engaged intellectual in the Sartrean sense, a citoyen, and his world view is rooted in the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment, promoting human emancipation from the constraints of religion and local traditions. Nevertheless, he was less preoccupied with the utopian vision itself than with the difficulties of its realization, which he viewed with a growing pessimism, stimulated by the foreboding of World War I and the cataclysm itself. Brandes himself pointed to his inspiration from Voltaire and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, to whom he devoted huge monographs in 1915 and 1916: “The eighteenth century’s keywords and slogans were free thought in science and pure humanity in poetry. Its major proponents are Voltaire and Goethe” (Hovedstrømninger 1: 233). Brandes was also well acquainted with German philosophy, and in particular with Hegel, whose philosophy at that time was central to the university curriculum in Denmark and left its mark in Main Currents.

The six volumes of Main Currents cover European literature from 1800 to 1848, focusing on the driving forces of European culture and literature during a period which was still undergoing fervent change. Brandes regarded Main Currents as the last act of a historical drama unfolding in the image of a tidal wave of action and reaction, in a tripartite rhythm (Hovedstrømninger 6: 376–77). First, the idea of freedom handed down from the eighteenth century was turned around as the conservative codification of culture and society gained momentum, particularly manifest in the works of the emigrant writers such as Mme de Staël; then, a new surge of personal and political emancipation emerged across Europe, with Byron’s death in 1824 as the turning point; and finally came the revolutions of 1848. All three phases are marked by the tidal movement of a reactionary pull and an emancipatory push.
in a dynamic complexity that finds multiple literary expressions within a dialectical quasi-Hegelian framework:

Do not misunderstand me as though I took reaction as such to be a backwards step. Far from it! Quite the contrary! A true, comprehensive and corrective reaction means progress. But a reaction like that is forceful, short and does not degenerate. After for some time having fought the excesses of the previous epoch, after having exposed what then was suppressed, it incorporates the valuable elements from the previous period, comes to terms with it and continues its movement. But this is not what happened here [after 1800].

(Hovedstrømninger 1: 16)

The translation of this ideological program into critical practice opened up a new way of both thinking and writing about literary history, exemplified in the six volumes: *Emigrant Literature* [Emigrantlitteraturen] (1872), *The Romantic School in Germany* [Den romantiske Skole i Tydskland] (1873), *The Reaction in France* [Reaktionen i Frankrig] (1874), *Naturalism in England* [Den engelske Naturalisme] (1875) (naturalism refers to nature poetry), *The Romantic School in France* [Den romantiske Skole i Frankrig] (1882), and *Young Germany* [Det unge Tyskland] (1890). For the first time “European literature is treated as the totality it has been since the Renaissance” (Nolin in Hertel and Kristensen 1980: 26; Moritzen 1922: xiv).

When Brandes pointed in the 1923 preface to the mixed reception of the first volumes, he put his finger on exactly that point. The aim of his undertaking was not to compile an anthology of accumulated essays on separate national literatures, nor did he want to offer a survey of quasi-causal links between individual texts and authors reaching across national boundaries and to turn them into ideal models. Instead, Brandes shifted from one country or one chronological slice in one volume to another in the next, and then back again, always zooming in on the cultural space where the development of the transnational driving forces in a particular moment appeared to be most forceful. He looked for the troubled tidal wave of the quest for freedom where it had the most decisive impact at a certain time, in a certain place, in a certain genre or through a certain literary movement. France, Germany and England stand out as the shifting centers of this process, other literatures being rather its result than its impetus.

At the age of thirty he was already formed as a comparatist with a focus on literature, old or new, as a cultural force in a contemporary perspective; but also as a comparatist who bridged between literary studies and topics of a broader cultural and political nature. He was also a comparatist in search of a method, here outlined through his own critical practice as the construction of authors’ portraits, mostly inspired by Hippolyte Taine, with whom he studied in Paris during 1866–67, but also by Charles Sainte Beuve.

**The global experience**

After his studies in Paris Brandes started to travel, and he continued to do so incessantly: from Finland in the North to Italy in the South, from the United States.
in the West to Russia in the East. From Berlin, Poland, Russia and Greece he wrote book-length travel accounts in which literary and historical surveys are combined with political analyses and reports in reviews, articles and columns (Samlede 11). He took up residence in Berlin from 1877 to 1883, but also stayed for extended periods of time in France and Italy. Through comments on literary works and cultural life elsewhere on the globe he also included Asia, the Middle East, New Zealand and South America. Through his extensive correspondence with international personalities as well as with young authors from all over the world who sought his advice on revision or publication of manuscripts, he often had first-hand records of the places he referred to in his literary criticism and in cultural and political debate.

In France he was at home in the circles of the cultural and political elite, having Georges Clemenceau and Anatole France among others as his personal friends. But he was never accepted at the Sorbonne, where Ferdinand Brunetière was his most renowned opponent, a position that was fueled by their opposite roles in the spectacular affaire Dreyfus (1894–1906), where Brandes vehemently defended the Jewish officer Alfred Dreyfus who was falsely accused of high treason (Clausen 1984). Brandes' works are not widely translated into French, compared to the many editions and re-edicitions in German and English. In his critical obituary of 1927, Fernand Baldensperger condemned Brandes' work as “obsolete, let us admit it after all, due to the superficiality of its knowledge and the lack of substance of its edifice” (Baldensperger 1927: 143).

In other places, however, his role as bête noir provoked the opposite reaction. His rebellious stance was applauded in China in the post-imperial cultural transition after 1905, with Lu Xun as a central mediator and based on Japanese, English and notably German translations. The anonymous obituary of 1927 stressed that Brandes “violently attacked the antiquated outlook on life prevailing in Danish society. He was met with hateful eyes” (Hertel and Kristensen 1980: 233). Also, Brandes’ repeated lecture tours to England from the 1890s and his visit to the United States 1914 had positive receptions in spite of the deficiencies of his spoken English, and already in 1892 the University of Chicago had offered him a chair.

Nevertheless, Brandes never met with universal approval, and particularly in Denmark and Germany his reputation never ceased to oscillate between negative and positive extremes. Through his affiliation with the Danish daily Politiken, founded in 1884 by his brother Edvard among others, he sided with the political left. After a heated public debate he was turned down in 1891 for a chair in comparative literature at the University of Copenhagen, but from 1902 he was given the right to take the title of professor.

The contemporary perspective

The contemporary importance of literature and criticism remained crucial to Brandes. Whenever possible he corrected and adapted re-edicitions and translations of his work for the situation in which they were now published. “He is contemporary who presents the great qualities in a person from the past like Voltaire,” he notes (Bogen 202). But more importantly, Brandes also adopted new ideas to further qualify his idea of individual freedom and historical dynamics.
In the 1880s he read the then unknown Friedrich Nietzsche. Here he found an answer to his key problem: how are the fermenting ideas of cultural progress turned into great art and how can we study this process? His answer was drawn directly from Nietzsche: through the great and unique personalities of history, transcending their own time. His first study of Nietzsche, “Aristocratic Radicalism” [Aristokratisk Radikalisme] (1889), gave Nietzsche European fame, but this presentation was modified in 1890 by “The Great Man, the Source of Culture” [Det store Menneske, Kulturens Kilde]. The first study not only stresses the importance of transgressive individual freedom from cultural constraints, but also underlines the right of the superior human being to bypass those constraints by suspending certain moral and democratic principles. The Danish philosopher Harald Høffding, among others, wrote a sharp rejoinder, “Democratic Radicalism,” pointing to Brandes’ dangerous self-sufficient elitism. In the next paper Brandes downplayed his radicalism, changed “aristocratic” to “great” and placed more emphasis on the capacity of the great personality to embrace the conflicting dimensions of his time and thereby, on behalf of humankind, to move the cultural process onto a new level.

Here Brandes developed a comparative method and a genre: the monograph portraying great authors and historical personalities. He composed a series of huge monographs on representative individuals who have been instrumental in the unfolding of human history, an effect that charges their works with contemporary significance. With the shift in focus from the historical processes in Main Currents to the great individuals behind the processes, a scent of hero-worshipping can be detected as more than a mere whiff, although Brandes stressed the endurance of their greatness rather than its superiority. The series consists of William Shakespeare, 1–3 (1895–96), Wolfgang Goethe, 1–2 (1915), François Voltaire, 1–2 (1916), Cæsar, 1–2 (1918) and Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1–2 (1921). This group was accompanied by smaller monographs on Søren Kierkegaard, Benjamin Disraeli, Ferdinand Lasalle, Heinrich Heine, Henrik Ibsen, Kropotkin, and Armand Carrel, among others, that appeared between 1877 and 1921.

The first of the major monographs, William Shakespeare, is also the first comprehensive study of Shakespeare’s work in its entirety. The English translation of 1898 saw many reprints and paved the way for a translation of Main Currents in 1901–5. Through meticulous readings of Shakespeare’s entire work, focusing on the characters, Brandes constructs Shakespeare as a personality, more complex than heroic, who becomes a prism for larger historical processes and thereby remains as contemporary as any modern writer.

This type of portrait also showed Brandes as capable of crafting a good story for a broad readership. Enhancing the impact of literature in contemporary culture was essential to him, as is exemplified by an essay “On Reading” [Om Læsning] (1899). His numerous talks for both learned and unspecialized audiences at home and abroad earned him a deserved reputation as an engaged, at times even a charismatic speaker. Brandes’ style is sharp and vibrant, with plenty of quotable phrases, and he saw this as one of the reasons for the harsh criticism he met from colleagues, precisely because he wanted to be “now critical, now educating, neither completely a scholar nor entirely an artist, but a blending of the two hard to categorize” (Hovedstrømninger 1: 12). But between 1903 and 1926 this quality also made him a
Nobel prize nominee thirteen times, following recommendation by various Danish, Scandinavian and international supporters, but without success (Jørgensen 2009: 49).

**Brandes and world literature**

Brandes’ monograph on Goethe ends with the following words:

> When Goethe died the term *World Literature*, which he had created, had become a reality and through the united efforts of many people he had himself become the center of world literature.

*(Goethe 2: 331)*

However, it is only in the essay “World Literature” [Verdenslitteratur] (1899) that Brandes discussed the concept of world literature directly. But the globalized perspective permeates his entire work, and has an increasing presence from the end of the nineteenth century. Particularly in his lesser known and smaller texts, Brandes anticipated some of the essential points of discussions that are now central to the study of world literature.

**The diffraction of local literatures**

The essay “World Literature” is a follow-up to Goethe’s scattered remarks from the 1820s (Larsen 2008; Madsen 2004). For a start Brandes reminds us of the progress of science as a global intellectual process and of the travelogues of nineteenth-century scientific expeditions. He adds that advances in transportation, communication, the modern press, and also translations accelerated the global process. There is no universal idealism at work here, as in Goethe, but concrete, globalized cultural encounters and interactions.

He defined world literature as a locally anchored literature that transcends its local constraints and opens the local perspective to a larger world. Some works will be translated, others not, some of them are written in languages which at present are expanding languages, others not. But the heart of the matter is the opening up of the local perspective towards the diversity of the translocal world. A literature that is immediately understandable everywhere may for that very reason be deprived of all “vigor” *(Samlede 12: 28)* simply because it does not belong to any concrete historical context. If something is written in order to be marketed as world literature, it is therefore highly probable that it is completely irrelevant.

The world literature of the future will become all the more captivating the more the mark of the national appears in it and the more heterogeneous it becomes, as long as it retains a universally human aspect as art and science.

*(Samlede 12: 28)*

Brandes’ earlier characterization of comparative studies in the image of a telescopic dual perspective corresponds to this dialectics: we can, and must, look at literature
from two alternating or rather complementary positions, through both the magnifying and the diminishing lenses.

**The globalized cultural approach**

The reason to study literature in a world literature perspective does not derive from an immanent literary or aesthetic point of departure. When literature, old or new, today circulates in a diverse global culture of translocal exchanges and conflicts this perspective becomes the necessary point of departure for literary studies.

Brandes could not agree more. But his approach to literature as a battlefield of ideas became increasingly historically concrete during his six years in Berlin, when he saw the nationalism of the rising Germany under Kaiser Wilhelm. Already in articles and reports from the 1880s he was warning against the consequences of militant nationalism. He clearly recognized the frightening prospect: not just another war in the world, but the world itself at war. His ironic rhetorical analysis of the emperor’s speech in July 1900 to German volunteer troops bound for China can still serve as a model for how to debunk pompous rhetoric in global politics (Samlede 17: 74–77). His 1914 book *The World at War* [Verdenskrigen] contains a penetrating analysis of the threatening developments around the globe that made him foresee the coming war. The book came out in German and English and had gone to four augmented printings by 1916, now including also his correspondence with political and cultural personalities reacting to the first edition and his earlier articles.

As Brandes saw the war as a result of parallel and conflicting nationalisms, he could not side with any of the parties, which made him *persona non grata* in Germany and ruined his long friendship with Georges Clemenceau and Anatole France. He could see cultural and literary trends only on a global scale in the network of nations, not on the level of any individual nation.

As a corollary to his growing awareness of the globalized context of modern culture, he also became aware of the troubled position of minorities. He spoke up loudly in their defence against suppression by regional powers – Danes in Northern Germany, Finns in Russia, Jews in Poland, and especially the Armenians in Turkey, whom he saw in 1900 as victims of a genocide. On the basis of accounts from eyewitnesses whom he knew personally, in his booklet on Armenia he revealed the atrocities as vividly as in any post-Holocaust account (Samlede 17: 3–20). In Brandes’ view, any local culture is the result of a permanent dialogue across local boundaries – linguistically, ideologically, politically – inducing the diversity of the larger world into the local culture. His criticism is focused precisely on the measures that prevent minority cultures from participating in the translocal world on their own conditions, but not to promote the nostalgic conservation of local cultures.

**Transnational themes**

Even as he was writing in the heyday of the nation-state, Brandes discussed individual literatures and authors in transnational cultural terms, often related to concrete cases (Houe 2007). From a political angle, this was the case in *The World at War*, including a new chapter written in 1917 on the sufferings of the Armenians, and it
was also the case in his engagement from 1897 to 1906 with Emile Zola, among others, in the appeal to the French and European public to support a fair trial for Alfred Dreyfus (Clausen 1984). From a literary angle, his late essay “On the Future of European Literature” [Spørgsmaalet om den evropæiske Literatur Fremtid] (1921) shows his literary preferences. He diagnoses three trends: the formalistic experiments, the religious and metaphysical dogmatism, and a broadly oriented literature in simple forms taking issue with the great transnational themes of the twentieth century. He goes with the last. Brandes would have been sympathetic to the resurfacing contemporary debate on cosmopolitanism and also to central global themes of literature: risk society, migration, trauma and forgiveness, international justice or genocide.

**Methodology**

To mention theory and methodology together when discussing Brandes is close to a contradiction. His central focus was the study of character inside and outside of fiction. He cultivated himself as an empathetic reader, guided by his passionate ideas on emancipation and his sensitivity to language. Although he was an avid reader and a rapid writer, he was aware that he could not read everything first hand. But he was not cut out for teamwork. Now and then he drew too-easy conclusions from second-hand reading, and he did not always control the fine line between paraphrase, quotation and his own writing. But distant reading in Franco Moretti’s sense could never be Brandes’ declared method (Moretti 2000). He wanted to have his nose in the texts. In his obituary on Taine he found that the heavy reliance on a natural science paradigm was of no great importance. What counted was that Taine approached the texts through an empathetic understanding of the author’s personality (Samlede 7: 57).

But, on the other hand, Brandes is neither unsystematic nor arbitrary in his approach. As he says in the conclusion to the last volume of Main Currents: “It goes without saying that the fundamental point of view adopted here [in Main Currents] is a personal one. […] The personal viewpoint is, however, not arbitrary” (Hovedstrømninger 6: 377). The common denominator in his critical practice is a *pars-pro-toto* reading. The great person, the local culture and language, a character, a set of images or a genre were seen as representative parts of a larger and diverse cultural context.

The same goes for his textual readings: in the essay “The Infinitely Small and the Infinitely Large in Poetry” [Det uendeligt Smaa og det uendeligt Store i Poesien] of 1869, he read a passage from *Henry VI, Part I* by Shakespeare with Danish Romantic drama as its negative contrast. The analysis is modified and incorporated into *William Shakespeare* (1: Ch. 24) (Bourguignon 2010: 129–41). His focus is the role of detail in literature: how the imponderabilia of a text not only add concreteness and specificity to a text, but also contribute to its larger clusters of meaning. He points to the scene where Hotspur is belittled by his wife, Lady Percy, after he has refused to disclose his plans to her (Act II, sc. iii). She just needs to bend his little finger and threatens to break it, and then he talks. From this detail Brandes read the frailty of power, the contrast between power and weakness, and he captured the whole conflicting thematic of the historical play and the complexity of its characters.
Also in 1869 Hans Christian Andersen, an author of European fame in his own day, is read in a *pars-pro-toto* perspective, here regarding the capacity of his writing to be translated and travel the world because of a linguistic particularity. Andersen created an innovative prose with a strong local imprint, but by exploiting two details, the freedom of spoken language and a child’s concrete and oblique perspective, he developed discursive strategies so elementary that they are recognizable across cultural boundaries and facilitate adequate translations (*Samlede* 2). In his 1899 essay on world literature, Brandes develops the translation perspective further and speaks trenchantly of the imbalance of power enjoyed by “major” literary languages (French, German, and English) over the greater difficulties that authors in smaller literary cultures encounter in entering a transnational literary sphere. Here he cited Andersen as a prime example of a minor author praised abroad, while a Danish giant such as Kierkegaard was ignored. But with the German translation (1879) of his monograph *Søren Kierkegaard* (1877) Brandes marked the beginning of Kierkegaard’s international fame.

After his heyday as one of the most renowned comparatists on the European and also global scene from the turn of the century and into the 1930s, Brandes fell into oblivion and became “the lonely Dane” (Wellek 1955). *Main Currents* and the huge monographs, together with the sheer size of his work and its wide-ranging references, are overwhelming, but do not in themselves secure him a central position. Practicing the dual telescopic principle of comparatism on Brandes himself will, however, bring him closer to us. We should regard the bulky volumes that made him famous through the diminishing end of the comparative telescope, and then, through the magnifying lens, direct our attention towards his basic ideas about literature and comparative studies, together with a number of his smaller texts. Then he again comes into view as an active partner in the development of world literature studies.

### Note

1 All quotations from Brandes are translated by me from the Danish editions referred to in the bibliography. If English translations are available, they can be found after the Danish title with the year of their first edition.

### Bibliography


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