**The Modern Breakthrough (ca. 1870-1890)**

Download picture of Georg Brandes:

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The Modern Breakthrough is a category of literary history first used in 1883 by the Danish critic Georg Brandes. Brandes used it to group together a series of Scandinavian authors of the preceding decade. More generally, the Modern Breakthrough came to identify the literary currents embedded in social realism and naturalism that grew in Scandinavia during the 1870s and the 1880s. Although closely related to European literary currents of the age, the Modern Breakthrough developed as a distinctly Scandinavian phenomenon. It also influenced other literatures through the works of key personalities such as Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and Jens Peter Jacobsen. Authors of the Modern Breakthrough shared an interest in social problems such as the tension between the working classes and the capitalist bourgeoisie, the role of women in society, and the struggle between science and religion. In the second half of the 1880s, the Modern Breakthrough increasingly became influenced by symbolism and impressionism and gradually extinguished during the 1890s, threatened by decadent and avant-garde literature.

In 1871, the Danish critic Georg Brandes delivered a series of lectures in comparative literature at the University of Copenhagen. In these lectures, which became a six-volume work entitled *Hovedstrømninger i det 19de Aarhundredes Litteratur* [*Main Currents in 19th Century Literature*, 1872-1890], Brandes strongly attacked the status quo of Danish (and, by extension, Scandinavian) literature, which he saw as lagging forty years behind the rest of Europe. Brandes’ lectures stirred up a heated debate and spurred responses from Scandinavian writers, who set to work on social realist and naturalist literature. During the 1870s and the 1880s, the literatures of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden enjoyed a great mutual enrichment, which made the Modern Breakthrough into a pan-Scandinavian phenomenon. The first author to take up Brandes’ challenge was the Norwegian Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, who in his play *En Fallit* (*The Bankrupt*, 1875) described the financial collapse of a business enterprise and its consequences on family life. Although the work played a pivotal role in the development of Scandinavian bourgeois drama, it did not put the *status quo* of the bourgeoisie under discussion. That task was instead assumed by another Norwegian, Henrik Ibsen, who began a series of plays with contemporary settings in 1877. Meanwhile, in Denmark, the poet Holger Drachmann wrote about political engagement in the collection *Sange ved Havet* (1877), and Jens Peter Jacobsen composed the naturalist historical novel *Fru Marie Grubbe* [*Marie Grubbe*, 1876]. The latter presents the decline of a noblewoman in terms permeated by a “Darwinist” disillusion about the possibility of influencing one’s own life, and ends with a declaration of atheism. Jacobsen radicalized such themes in his 1880 novel *Niels Lyhne*, a classic of Scandinavian naturalism, where the search for identity through love leaves the inept Niels only a great internal void.

The Modern Breakthrough became particularly productive at the turn of the Eighties. In 1879, Ibsen published his groundbreaking play *Et Dukkehjem* [*A Doll’s House*], which brought to the fore the condition of women in bourgeois society. That same year, the Swede August Strindberg depicted the life and disillusion of Stockholm’s intellectual and bohemian scene with crude naturalism in the novel *Röda Rummet* [*The Red Room*]. Other authors who began writing prose centred on contemporary issues include the Norwegian Alexander Kielland, whose 1880 novel *Garman & Worse* portrayed the Norwegian bourgeoisie and its inner tensions. Jonas Lie and Arne Garborg, also Norwegians, discussed the condition of the rural classes and their struggle with modernization in their respective novels *Familien på Gilje* [*The Family at Gilje*] and *Bondestudentar* [*The Making of Daniel Braut*], both published in 1883. In Denmark, Karl Gjellerup touched upon the political confusion of the local middle class (*Germanernes Lærling*, 1882) and Henrik Pontoppidan explored the misery of the Danish countryside (*Stækkede Vinger*, 1881). In Sweden, a group of writers called “det unga Sverige”(the young Sweden), clustered around Gustaf af Geijerstam, Ola Hansson, and (until the mid-1880s) August Strindberg, explored the thin line between the ongoing realist trend and the need for a return to their culture’s spirit (see Geijerstam’s country portraits in *Fattigt Folk*, 1884-1889, and Hansson’s poetry collection *Notturno*, 1885).

By 1883, the Modern Breakthrough had developed into an established, pan-Scandinavian current (Brandes coined the expression in an essay published that same year), and literary and social debates engaged authors and critics from all three countries. A significant case is the so-called “woman question”, which, spurred by Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, had a moment of recrudescence with the publication of Bjørnson’s play *En Hanske* [*A Gauntlet*, 1883], in which the author claimed premarital virginity for both women and men as a condition for the parity of the sexes. Bjørnson was strongly attacked by the radicals, Georg Brandes first and foremost, but also from more conservative voices such as August Strindberg, whose collections of short stories *Giftas* [*Getting Married*, 1884-1885] hinted that the emancipation of women was the cause of their mental oppression of men. The “woman question”, which had also been investigated by female writers such as the Norwegian Amalie Skram and the Swedish Victoria Benedictsson and Anne Charlotte Leffler, was also symptomatic of a growing split among the authors of the Modern Breakthrough (for example, it was one of the reasons Strindberg left “det unga Sverige”).

In the second half of the 1880s, the Modern Breakthrough became influenced by other literary and artistic currents: symbolism, as in the case of Ibsen’s plays; and impressionism, for example in the 1887 novel *Stuk* by the Dane Herman Bang. In *Stuk*, the frequent changes of perspective clearly part ways with naturalism’s objective narrative. Even Strindberg’s “naturalist” plays *Fadren* [*The Father*, 1887] and *Fröken Julie* [*Miss Julia*, 1888], both centred on a psychological battle between women and men and between upper and lower classes, are better considered detailed analyses of the mechanisms of the human psyche than realist accounts of contemporary social problems. In the 1890s, many authors who had started their careers in the Modern Breakthrough went on to write in the vein of decadent and avant-garde literature, symbolism, and Neoromanticism, following wider European trends. The Modern Breakthrough gradually extinguished itself and had substantially died out by 1900.

**Timeline**

1871 Georg Brandes starts his lectures at the University of Copenhagen

1875 Bjørnson publishes *En Fallit* and introduces modern drama to Scandinavia

1876 Jacobsen publishes the naturalist novel *Fru Marie Grubbe*

1877 Ibsen starts his cycle of contemporary dramas with *Samfundets Støtter*

1879 Publication of Ibsen’s *Et Dukkehjem* and Strindberg’s *Röda Rummet*

1880 Publication of Jacobsen’s *Niels Lyhne* and Kielland’s *Garman & Worse*

1883 Bjørnson publishes *En Hanske*. Great stir in Scandinavia, Strindberg breaks with ”det unga Sverige”

1884 Ibsen publishes his first play inspired by symbolism: *Vildanden*

1887-1888 Herman Bang publishes *Stuk*, influenced by impressionism, and Strindberg *Fröken Julie*, the first of his “naturalist” plays that provide a psychological analysis of character

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