

THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

GEORGE BRANDES'S "MAIN CURRENTS OF NINETEENTH CENTURY LITERATURE"

By Burton Rascoe

WE are already beginning to see the first rays of the dawn of a reaction against the tendencies of which this monumental work is the history and the philosophical interpretation. The continuance of life is conditioned on change; and the era of introspection which began with Rousseau and which culminates in Freud and Joyce is already on the wane. There will be for a half century, probably, a process of refinement in the Freudian and Joycean directions; but such refinements will not be inaugurations. Freud in the realm of subconscious experiment and speculation, and Joyce in the exploitation of the subconscious as material for art, have already reached the apotheosis of the tendency which began with Rousseau. Change must continue by the evolution of new tendencies which are either in reaction to Freud and Joyce or which use them as points of departure for entirely new fields.

It remains, of course, to be seen what direction and culmination the new tendency will take. But it seems probable that certain features of eighteenth century thought and art which the nineteenth century revolted against and deposed will take on a new life and fresh significance, and that with a combination of the residua of nineteenth century and eighteenth century experience and speculation

there will be formed a new tendency which is at once urbane and democratic, tolerant and restrained. There is already to be observed a very definite interest in the eighteenth century, which almost amounts to a fad. Eighteenth century memoirs and diaries are beginning to be resuscitated and reissued in new editions; Saint-Simon and Voltaire, Chesterfield and Laurence Sterne, Benjamin Franklin and the French epigrammatists were never more popular in certain circles than they are now. New novels are coming in with an eighteenth century background, among the most notable of which is Elinor Wylie's "Jennifer Lorn".

Meanwhile here is, in six volumes, the history of a phase of the human soul in evolution. It is a history which is as "creative" as any work of the imagination, and which is destined to outlast, I believe, such an analogous work in fiction as Balzac's "Comédie Humaine". It is at once the history of a continent in its material and spiritual aspects and the story, always intimate, human, and absorbing, of the personalities which influenced the course of that history.

Brandes's method is a combination of the best in the methods of criticism developed by Taine, Sainte-Beuve, and Renan. It is biographical, historical, subjective, and detached. It is in-

formed always (some would say tainted) with a revolutionary philosophy. Brandes is ever on the side of the angels of revolt, because, philosophically, he is opposed to any static condition in life, knowing full well that stasis results in atrophy or degeneration.

The work was begun as a series of lectures in the University of Copenhagen when Brandes was twenty nine years old. When he had completed the series, ten years later, he had covered the entire history of European thought during the nineteenth century, with comprehensive and meticulous detail, especially in regard to the forces in reaction against the eighteenth century and "its dry rationalism, its taboo of emotion and fancy, its misunderstanding of history, its ignoring of legitimate national peculiarities, its colorless view of nature and its conception of religions as being conscious frauds". There is no historico-critical work like this later than Plutarch, nothing approaching it in its artistic unity and cohesion, in dramatic variety and symmetry of form.

The beginnings of the reaction of the nineteenth century, according to Brandes, are to be found in the literature of the French emigrants, inspired by Rousseau. The second group, with the same source of inspiration, is the semi-Catholic Romantic group in Germany. The third group, in which figure Joseph de Maistre, Lamennais, Lamartine, and Victor Hugo, represents the militant, triumphant reaction. The fourth group is headed by Byron, at first a flaming symbol to his English contemporaries and later the inspirer of the war of liberalism throughout Europe. The fifth group comprises the French Romantics. "The writers of the sixth and last group, young Germany, are inspired by the

ideas of the Greek war of liberation, and the Revolution of July, and, like the French authors, see in Byron's great shade the leader of the liberal movement."

The reaction was achieved before the first half of the nineteenth century was over. In one decade of feverish activity, beginning in 1840, the bulk of the literature of the revolt was written; the rest was a departure from the revolt. It was an era of temperaments on the loose, and to the present age some of its sublimest ends were achieved in attitudes which are slightly ridiculous. It was the era of Byronism and the flowing locks—splendid, incontinent, beautiful, feminine, and rather gushing. All art is play; and the nineteenth is the century in which people began to take their play seriously. An epidemic of adolescent suicides followed the popularity of Goethe's "Werther"; the première of "Hernani" is an historic farce which at the time was a matter of seriousness even to martyrdom; the malaise of the times fevered the feminine brow of de Musset; the great demigod Hugo conceived himself as another St. John of Patmos and delivered ringing platitudes in antitheses from his romantic exile in Guernsey. In Germany the gifted and sensitive Jew, Heine, failing to effect an adjustment between his heritage of racial gifts and his environment, wrote tortured, tender lyrics, bitter-sweet, romantic, melancholy and acidulous. In England, the great Wordsworth left off his contemplations of woodland beauty and of simple country life to answer the drum call of the Revolutionists and to celebrate the upheaval with a bewildered innocence, only to return exhausted by the excitement and unable to control his wits again in beautiful and effectual order. Shelley beat his luminous

wings against the void, but not vainly, as Matthew Arnold suggested; and poets and novelists everywhere sang of revolt and defeat with a tragical, heavy melancholy.

Below these men in stature and significance there were other men of talent whose work is now more or less ignored but whose influence was great and directive in the nineteenth century revolt; and Brandes has not forgotten them. They are the men of vision and personality who were more articulate in speech than they were with pen and ink—men like Charles Nodier—around whom, as young men, poets who later achieved fame gathered for tutelage, ideas and inspiration.

It is like reading an absorbing romance, full of convincing realistic detail and heightened by recurrent dramatic incidents, to take up the six volumes of this great historical-critical work. Brandes's aim is to show you everything, to make you know and feel the main currents of the nineteenth century; and, as he is anthropocentric in his philosophy, he sees the spirit

of the century concentrated in the lives and works of the literary figures who voiced that spirit. It is a very human, intimate, and personal study of each man that he gives us.

He presents to us first the writer's milieu; next the pertinent facts of his biography; and finally he considers the writer's work as a chronological development and as a whole. He is intelligent enough not to make the mistake of the American anti-Rousseauists, like Paul Elmer More, Irving Babbitt, and Barrett Wendell, who in protesting against a whole natural and inevitable evolution of the human spirit protest vainly against human life. Knowledge of the nineteenth century, such as Brandes affords us, may or may not be useful to us in bringing about the further necessary changes in our social and literary development; but useful or not, it meets the requirements of all great creative art.

Main Currents of Nineteenth Century Literature. By George Brandes. Six volumes. Boni and Liveright.