

**MAIN CURRENTS IN NINETEENTH
CENTURY LITERATURE,
IN SIX VOLUMES, VOL. I,
THE EMIGRANT LITERATURE**

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Main currents in nineteenth century literature, in six volumes, Vol. I, The Emigrant Literature
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GEORG BRANDES

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To the Memory
of
HANS BRÖCHNER

INTRODUCTION

It is my intention in the present work to trace the outlines of a psychology of the first half of the nineteenth century by means of the study of certain main groups and movements in European literature. The stormy year 1848, a historical turning-point, and hence a break, is the limit to which I purpose following the process of development. The period between the beginning and the middle of the century presents the spectacle of many scattered and apparently disconnected literary efforts and phenomena. But he who carefully observes the main currents of literature perceives that their movements are all conditioned by one great leading movement with its ebb and flow, namely, the gradual fading away and disappearance of the ideas and feelings of the preceding century, and the return of the idea of progress in new, ever higher-mounting waves.

The central subject of this work is, then, the reaction in the first decades of the nineteenth century against the literature of the eighteenth, and the vanquishment of that reaction. This historic incident is of European interest, and can only be understood by a comparative study of European literature. Such a study I purpose attempting by simultaneously tracing the course of the most important movements in French, German, and English literature. The comparative view possesses the double advantage of bringing foreign literature so near to us that we can assimilate it, and of removing our own until we are enabled to see it in its true perspective. We neither see what is too near the eye nor what is too far away from it. The scientific view of literature

provides us with a telescope of which the one end magnifies and the other diminishes; it must be so focussed as to remedy the illusions of unassisted eyesight. The different nations have hitherto stood so remote from each other, as far as literature is concerned, that they have only to a very limited extent been able to benefit by each other's productions. For an image of the position as it is, or was, we must go back to the old fable of the fox and the stork. Every one knows that the fox, having invited the stork to dinner, arranged all his dainties upon a flat dish from which the stork with his long bill could pick up little or nothing. We also know how the stork revenged himself. He served his delicacies in a tall vase with a long and slender neck, down which it was easy for him to thrust his bill, but which made it impossible for the fox, with his sharp muzzle, to get anything. The various nations have long played fox and stork in this fashion. It has been and is a great literary problem how to place the contents of the stork's larder upon the fox's table, and *vice versa*.

Literary history is, in its profoundest significance, psychology, the study, the history of the soul. A book which belongs to the literature of a nation, be it romance, drama, or historical work, is a gallery of character portraits, a storehouse of feelings and thoughts. The more momentous the feelings, the greater, clearer, and wider the thoughts, the more remarkable and at the same time representative the characters, so much the greater is the historical value of the book, so much the more clearly does it reveal to us what was really happening in men's minds in a given country at a given period.

Regarded from the merely aesthetic point of view as a work of art, a book is a self-contained, self-existent whole, without any connection with the surrounding world. But looked at from the historical point of view, a book, even though it may be a perfect, complete work of art, is only a

piece cut out of an endlessly continuous web. *Æsthetically* considered, its idea, the main thought inspiring it, may satisfactorily explain it, without any cognisance taken of its author or its environment as an organism; but historically considered, it implies, as the effect implies the cause, the intellectual idiosyncrasy of its author, which asserts itself in all his productions, which conditions this particular book, and some understanding of which is indispensable to its comprehension. The intellectual idiosyncrasy of the author, again, we cannot comprehend without some acquaintance with the intellects which influenced his development, the spiritual atmosphere which he breathed.

The intellectual phenomena which condition, elucidate, and explain each other, fall of themselves into natural groups.

What I shall describe is a historical movement partaking of the form and character of a drama. The six different literary groups it is my intention to represent may be looked on as six acts of a great play. In the first group, the French Emigrant Literature inspired by Rousseau, the reaction begins; but here the reactionaries are still everywhere mingled with the revolutionary currents. In the second group, the semi-Catholic Romantic school of Germany, the reaction is on the increase; it is more vigorous and holds itself more aloof from the contemporary struggle for progress and liberty. The third group, consisting of such men as Joseph de Maistre, Lamennais in his strictly orthodox period, Lamartine and Victor Hugo when they (after the restoration of the monarchy) were still mainstays of the Legitimist and clerical party, represents the militant, triumphant reaction. Byron and his English contemporaries form the fourth group. It is this one man, Byron, who produces the revulsion in the great drama. The Greek war of liberation breaks out, a revivifying breeze blows over Europe, Byron falls like a hero in the cause of Greece, and his death

makes a tremendous impression on all the productive minds of the Continent. Shortly before the Revolution of July a change of front occurs among the great authors of France; they form the French Romantic school, which is our fifth group, a new Liberal movement on the roll of whose adherents we find such names as Lamennais, Hugo, Lamartine, Musset, George Sand, &c. The movement passes from France into Germany, and in that country also Liberal ideas are victorious. The writers forming the sixth and last group which I shall depict, 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 authors of Young Germany, Heine, Börne, Gutzkow, Ruge, Feuerbach, &c., prepare, together with the contemporary French writers, the great upheaval of 1848.

A household god made of wax, that had been carelessly left standing beside a fire in which precious Campanian vases were baking, began to melt.

It addressed bitter complaints to the element. "See," it said, "how cruelly you treat me! To these things you give durability, me you destroy."

But the fire answered: "You have nothing to complain of but your own nature. As for me, I am fire, always and everywhere."

W. HEINSE.