# Traces of Friedrich Nietzsche's Philosophy in Scandinavian Literature

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## 1. Introduction. The Role of the Danish Critic Georg Brandes

The age of Friedrich Nietzsche in Scandinavia came after the age of Émile Zola, to whom Scandinavian writers such as Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg were indebted with a view to naturalistic ideas and attitudes.

> Friedrich Nietzsche appears to me the most interesting writer in German literature at the present time. Though little known even in his own country, he is a thinker of a high order, who fully deserves to be studied, discussed, contested and mastered (Brandes 1915: 1).

This is what the Danish critic Georg Brandes asserted in his long *Essay on Aristocratic Radicalism*, which was published in August 1889 in the periodical *Tilskueren* from Copenhagen, and this is the moment when Nietzsche became to be known not only in Scandinavia but also in other European countries.

> *The Essay on Aristocratic Radicalism* was the first study of any length to be devoted, in the whole of Europe, to this man, whose name has since flown round the world and is at this moment one of the most famous among our contemporaries (*Ibidem*: 59),

wrote Brandes ten years later. The term *Aristocratic Radicalism* had been previously used by the Danish critic in a letter he wrote to Nietzsche himself, from Copenhagen on 26 November 1887:

> …a new and original spirit breathes to me from your books […] I find much that harmonizes with my own ideas and sympathies, the depreciation of the ascetic ideals and the profound disgust with democratic mediocrity, your aristocratic radicalism […] In spite of your universality you are very German in your mode of thinking and writing (*Ibidem*: 63).

Nietzsche's reply to this letter was given from Nice on 2 December 1887: "The expression *Aristocratic Radicalism*, which you employ, is very good. It is, permit me to say, the cleverest thing I have yet read about myself" (*Ibidem*: 64). The

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*Essay on Aristocratic Radicalism* had been preceded by a series of five lectures delivered by Brandes at the University of Copenhagen on 10, 17, 24 April, 1 and 8 May 1888. The daily paper *Politiken* had given extensive details about these lectures and the enthusiasm they generated, and even led to an exchange of public opinions in the above mentioned *Tilskueren* with the Danish philosopher Harald Høffding (in 1889 and 1890). While Brandes promoted the *Aristocratic Radicalism*, Høffding was on the side of *Democratic Radicalism*. Brandes wrote about the interest around these lectures also in a letter to the German philosopher on 29 April 1888:

> The first time I lectured on your works, the hall was not quite full, an audience of perhaps a hundred and fifty, since no one knew who and what you are. But as an important newspaper reported my first lecture, and as I have myself written an article on you, interest was roused, and next time the hall was full to bursting. Some three hundred people listened with the greatest attention to my exposition of your works. Nevertheless, I have not ventured to repeat the lectures, as has been my practice for many years, since the subject is hardly of a popular nature. I hope the result will be to get you some good readers in the North (Brandes 1915: 82-83).

The enthusiasm around the lectures is reported to Nietzsche as well on 23 May 1888, when Brandes wrote that they

> …ended, as the papers say, in applause "which took the form of an ovation". The ovation is yours almost entirely… For I can only claim the credit of reproducing, clearly and connectedly, and intelligibly to a Northern audience, what you had originated (*Ibidem*: 86).

These lectures did not make a presentation of Nietzsche's whole work, but referred with enthusiastic criticism mainly to the works *Untimely Meditations* (1873-1876), *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885). At that time Brandes was an authority in Scandinavia after he had lectured in 1871 on a lively literature that should bring problems to debate and published the *Main Currents in the Literature of the Nineteenth Century* in six volumes between 1872 and 1890. His contribution led in fact to the Modern breakthrough in Scandinavia. This is one of the reasons why the impact on the audience was so powerful. Given this context Nietzsche's ideas were interpreted as a signal for a new age. He was a former university professor (1869-1878) and a philosopher concerned with moral values, who started as Schopenhauer's disciple and Richard Wagner's admirer.

In the pessimistic decade of naturalism, 1880-1890, Nietzsche appears to Brandes as one of the "spirits that stand on a level with the most remarkable personalities of Contemporary Thought as far as peculiarity, independence, defiance and tremendous supremacy of aristocracy are concerned [Aander som i Særhed, i Selvstændighed, i Trods, i adels vældig Eneraadighed staa i Højde med de ejendommeligste Personligheder i Samtidens Tænkning]" (Beyer 1960: 123). It seems that he had a greater influence on Swedish literature (from whose better known writers we may mention August Strindberg and Ola Hansson), but also in Norway we may refer to Arne Garborg, while echoes of Nietzschean thinking are to



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be found as well in the works of Henrik Ibsen[1] and Knut Hamsun. Although these writers had different views on morality, religion or life in general, the Superman, the will to power, the master-slave morality, the eternal return, the Dionysian opposing the Apollonian are some of the ideas that have been given a wide range of interpretations and have found correspondences in their works.

**2. Nietzsche and August Strindberg**

Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy reached Sweden at a time when its literature took its source of inspiration from Scandinavia especially from Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, representatives of Norwegian realism. August Strindberg was the first Swedish writer who read Nietzsche's works and moreover exchanged letters with him for several weeks in 1888 until the philosopher's written farewell letter before his mental collapse.

In a letter sent from Turin on 7 December 1888 Nietzsche even asked Strindberg to consider translating his *Ecce Homo* into French after reading the French version of Strindberg's naturalistic play *The Father* (1887) that the Swedish writer himself had been responsible for. Strindberg finished *The Father* only after his encounter with the German philosopher, whom he had not known before. In the play, readers may witness the antagonism between the sexes. "The encounter was primarily of psychological importance. Strindberg found in Nietzsche's attacks on conventional social and ethical values justification for his own violent attitude" (Borland 1956: 45).

It appears from his correspondence that Strindberg read Nietzschean works such as *Beyond Good and Evil* (in 1888), *Human, All Too Human* (in 1889), and that he also received *The Case of Wagner* from Brandes, *The Twilight of the Idols* and *On the Genealogy of Morals* from Nietzsche himself. Moreover, he knew about Zarathustra through Brandes and Ola Hansson. Strindberg himself admitted Nietzsche's influence in the preface to *Miss Julie* (1888). This preface was a manifesto of naturalism. The work *Beyond Good and Evil* which he had read, with the re-examination of the concepts of sympathy and cruelty, may have had impact on Strindberg. Both Strindberg and Nietzsche prove to have misogynistic attitudes, but Nietzsche's thinking implies not only anti-feminism, but also contempt for the 'herd', nihilism, and emphasis on the master-slave morality, the Dionysian side and will to power.

> Feminism, he found, was one of the baneful results of democracy, which in turn had sprung from Christianity, mankind's greatest misfortune. The right to dominate and exploit the weak needed no justification because life itself was the will to power (Borland 1956: 153).

As it had happened with other Scandinavian writers such as Ibsen, Brandes was at the beginning the intermediary between Strindberg and Nietzsche. According

[1] In *Henrik Ibsen and the German Culture of his Time* (Leon 2011), we investigated interferences regarding Nietzche's works *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *On the Genealogy of Morals* and Ibsen's plays *Rosmersholm* (1886) and *The Masterbuilder* (1892).



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to a letter written by Brandes to Nietzsche, from Copenhagen, on 16 November 1888, we find out that

> August Strindberg lives here, in Holte, near Copenhagen. He is particularly fond of you, because he thinks he finds in you his own hatred of women. On this account he calls you "modern" (irony of fate). On reading the newspaper reports of my spring lectures, he said: "It is an astonishing thing about Nietzsche; much of what he says is just what I might have written" (Brandes 1915: 93).

The newspaper reports refer to the issues from *Politiken* from April and May 1888. Strindberg makes reference to Nietzsche as well in a letter dated 17 May 1888 and addressed to the Swedish poet and novelist Verner von Heidenstam: "Buy yourself a German modern philosopher named Nietzsche, about whom G.B. lectured. There is *everything* to read [Köp dig en tysk modern filosof som heter Nietzsche om hvilken G. B. hällit föreläsningar. Der står *allt* att läsa]" (cited in Borland 1956: 17).

Nietzsche's influence is obvious in Strindberg's tale *Tschandala: a story from the 17th century* (1889) from the very title. This was a historical longer short story, which was published in Danish translation. Nietzsche had also used the term "Tschandala" in *The Twilight of the Idols* (written in 1888), which Strindberg had received from the German philosopher, and also in *The Antichrist*, written in the same year. A "Tschandala" is a member of the Hindu lower caste. The story implies the dissection of an inferior being named Jensen with whom the academic Andreas Törner comes into conflict. The decade 1880-1890 marked by naturalism represented in fact the age of the vivisections or dissections of the individual. Strindberg puts a stress on the Gothic atmosphere at Bögely and the struggle of wills for survival between the two men.

In 1890 Strindberg wrote the novel *I havsbandet*/*By the Open Sea*, which he intended to be a fictional experiment influenced by Nietzschean philosophy. In 1909 in the preface to the fourth volume of the autobiographical work *The Son of a Servant* (1886-1909), Strindberg wrote: "*By the Open Sea*. Nietzsche's philosophy influences; but the individual is defeated in the struggle for absolute individualism. Introduces the 90's: Übermensch [*I havsbandet.* Nietzsches Filosofi influerar; men Individen går under i strävan till den absoluta Individualismen. Inleder 90-talet: Übermensch]" (Stern 2008: 246). Although the struggle for power in Strindberg's writings resembles the Nietzschean will to power, the Swedish writer seems keener on the practical aspects of one's individual power over the others, with the conflicts between the local population and outsiders. Axel Borg, the main character of the novel, may be seen as a variant of the Nietzschean Superman, and the book discusses his traits and development as a superior individual. The open sea proves a recurring theme with Strindberg, and the book is the third one about the archipelago life, after *Hemsöborna/The People of Hemsö* (1887) (also concerned with the struggle for power) and *Skärkarlsliv/Life in the Skerries* (1888). The end of the novel leads to Borg's mental collapse because of an isolation chosen since he had never been appreciated for his scientific results and never received gratitude. This is



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perhaps as a reminiscence of Nietzsche's near-madness transparent in the philosopher's last letter to Strindberg.

The Superman is the ideal and at the same time the result of development. This ideal lies beyond the present human being. In the pages of the novel, Axel Borg is a very intelligent scientist, with a superior understanding and whose desire to conquer makes him lose the chance to love Maria whose inferiority he admires. Borg's character in the novel is dual. Thus he combines instinctual irrationality, which favours the understanding of nature with scientific reason. As a superior man he wants to organize the "herd" on the archipelago. He feels himself very different from the local population since he approaches scholarly topics and speaks in an aristocratic way. However, he does not succeed in mastering the herd. On the contrary, in the end, he is seeking death alone on the open sea. Consequently, the story proves that the writer does not believe that one's fate is determined by the will to power. According to the naturalistic method Strindberg also adhered to, the human fate is determined by environment and heredity. Although a strong man at the beginning, later Borg's personality collapses. He turns weak and does not care for anything any longer.

It seems that it was not just a direct influence of Nietzsche on Strindberg, but that the latter had made similar discoveries with the German philosopher also due to the emotional atmosphere of the time. More precisely, Nietzsche helped him discover his own prejudices and resentments as writers imitate subconscious or unconscious feelings they have in themselves (see Van Tieghem 1966: 120).

> The disillusionment and the sense of persecution during the years of exile intensified his rancour. And although he did not appreciate the depth and force of Nietzsche's negations – seeing in him the pamphleteer rather than the poet – he imagined he found in the slogans and cruder generalizations concerning Christianity, women and the herd, a method in what others, and at times he himself, had regarded as madness (Borland 1956: 46).

### 3. Nietzsche and Knut Hamsun

As far as the Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun is concerned, he is a representative of the Neo-Romantic movement at the end of the 19th century, at a time when the Nietzschean spirit had already spread in the Peninsula due to Brandes. In Hamsun's case, the parallels with Nietzsche's world of ideas include works from his early production such as *Hunger* (1890), *Mysteries* (1892) or *Pan* (1894).

> The works of Hamsun […] reveal the obstacles and difficulties an aspiring *Übermensch* in a historical context is bound to experience. On the one hand, the reader […] might find it disillusioning to see how difficult it may be to reach beyond the status quo to attain a greater relationship to life. On the other hand, […] [the] works can thus assist us in preparing for the obstacles we today might encounter if we decide to perform a revaluation of our lives in order to enhance them and our culture (Sabo 2000: 200).

In his 1890 manifesto *From the Unconscious Life of the Soul* (*Fra Det ubevidste Sjæleliv*), Hamsun criticized the type of characters of the preceding generation of writers and stressed the importance of a new type of literature with



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"several *individual occurrences* in the books, and these to a certain extent, perhaps more similar to the mental life lived by mature people nowadays [flere *individuelle Tilfælder* i Bøgerne, og disse forsaavidt kanske mere svarende til det Sindsliv, som modne Mennesker i Nutiden lever]" (Hamsun 1965: 42). Hamsun seems to follow Nietzsche's philosophy when he considers the mind subjected to will and stresses the importance of instinctual powers as compared to rational and spiritual ones.

Hamsun's writings often made reference to Nietzsche, but we do not know how thoroughly he studied his philosophy. However, the ideas of the Superman and vitality, the antidemocratic ideas, and the stress on the irrational attracted him. Both Hamsun and Nietzsche showed through their works the revolt against their age, the so-called modern world. Probably Hamsun's revolt was strengthened by the Nieztschean spirit since

> …in the course of five or six years Nietzsche's intellectual tendency […] became the ruling tendency of a great part of the literature of France, Germany, England, Italy, Norway, Sweden and Russia (Brandes 1915: 103).

As with Strindberg, we may refer also in the Hamsun-Nietzsche parallels to similarities in the cultural and social context, which led to similarities in the intellectual climate. In 1889 Hamsun published his polemical book *Fra det moderne Amerikas Aandsliv / The cultural life of modern America*, written after Hamsun had come back from America (1882-1884, 1886-1888). Here he implied a certain connection between the materialistic American way of life and the crisis of the modern civilization. The Nietzschean theme of the rejection of the modern world also appears in later novels written by Hamsun: *Børn av Tiden / Children of the Age* (1913), *Segelfoss By / Segelfoss Town* (1915), *Markens Grøde / The Growth of the Soil* (1917). Hamsun's characters dislike the big city which tries to remove them from their origins. Since they do not want to be engulfed by mass civilization, they prefer to wander in loneliness. A comparison may be made to Zarathustra's call for loneliness and contempt for civilization. Modern times are a threat for aristocracy, and Hamsun approaches this theme in works such as *Victoria, Children of the Age* and *Segelfoss Town*. The plays Hamsun wrote at the very end of the 19th century: *Ved Rigets Port / At the Gate of the Kingdom* (1895), *Livets Spil / The Game of Life* (1896) and *Aftenrøde / Evening glow* (1898) could also take their source of inspiration in Nietzsche's philosophy of morality. The philosopher Ivar Kareno, a key character of these plays is sceptical of democracy and liberalism. A possible variant of the Superman, he is tempted by a morality beyond standardized norms, beyond good and evil.

The rejection of the city is obvious with the characters that have an affinity for nature and are attracted to sea or forest. Thus, the efforts to resist progress are also noticeable in *Pan* and *Mysteries*. Hamsun resembles Nietzsche when

> ...he stresses the diversity in the psychic life and in the human personality. It is with characters like Nagel in *Mysteries* and lieutenant Glahn in *Pan* that perhaps for the first time in Nordic literature, there appears a literary character that no longer has only one dominating feature, but that is an extremely complex personality and more a battlefield for unpredictable and contradictory drives rather than a psychic unity [...han understreker mangfoldet i det psykiske liv og i den menneskelige personlighet.



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> Det er med skikkelser som Nagel i *Mysterier* og løytnant Glahn i *Pan* at det, kanskje for første gang i nordisk litteratur, oppstår en litterær person som ikke lenger har én dominerende egenskap, men som er en esktremt sammensatt personlighet og mer en slagmark for uforutsigbare og motstridende drifter enn en psykisk enhet] (Kunnas 1995: 31).

Glahn is definitely a man of nature, and nature is not necessarily compatible with rationality. The character is not comfortable in social situations, and lacks manners. He confides in his instinctual powers, and Hamsun gives an important role in his work to natural elements in unity with the individual. The chosen title *Pan* reminds both of the Greek god and of pantheism. A former lieutenant, Glahn finds his satisfaction in solitude in a forest in the North of Norway. He prefers the company of his dog, and spends his time hunting and wandering in the forest. The forest brings him equilibrium and loneliness becomes his friend.

The close relationship with nature is typical of the Norwegians' world, but nature beings – birds and animals – also speak to Zarathustra. Glahn's cabin in the woods may be reminiscent of Zarathustra's cave. Just like Zarathustra, he is faithful to the earth at a time when mankind seems to have lost direct contact with nature because of the evolution of the society. But although a follower of Zarathustra's teaching, in the end Glahn prefers to die than re-evaluate all his values, love included. He loves Edvarda, but she engages to marry the Finnish baron. This leads to Glahn's despair. Even if he dies, it seems that it was Glahn's will to annoy his companion so that the latter kills him. We seem to deal with a staged suicide caused by Glahn's strong will. Previously, this will had been troubled only by the love of Edvarda. Just like in Ibsen's *Rosmersholm,* the end may imply a suicide in the name of eternal return. Glahn will be reborn like Ibsen's Rosmer and Rebekka. In the same way in which Zarathustra rejects the authority of a Christian God, Hamsun's characters find their gods in nature.

> The celebration of nature that runs through Hamsun's entire work has the appearance of a pantheism that requires no church or ministers for the individual to experience his immediate connection to nature (Sabo 2000: 334).

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is one of the Nietzschean writings found in Hamsun's personal library. But Hamsun's personality was much more different from Nietzsche's than Strindberg's for example as he was a more social and balanced person and lacked the pathological aspects which influenced the philosopher's life. Hamsun has remained one of the major Norwegian writers despite the controversies around him caused by the support of Nazism.

The attraction to loneliness is exerted as well in the case of Nagel from Hamsun's *Mysteries*. The behaviours of these two main characters, Nagel and Glahn, lack a rational foundation. They do things others cannot understand and become irrational as if created according to Nietzsche's view. The German critic Martin Beheim-Schwarzbach sees Nagel as "the incarnation of Nietzsche's cardinal virtues: intelligence, courage, sympathy and solitude [inkarnasjonen av Nietzsches kardinaldyder: intelligens, mot, medlidenhet og ensomhet]" (see Kunnas 1995: 31). He may be provocative and rude. Despite its logical aspects, Nietzsche's philosophy is ambivalent and contradictory. Hamsun's novel *Mysteries* remains in a similar way



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a mystery even after every new logical reading. The same applies to *Hunger* and *Pan* which offer ambiguous and ambivalent lines as characters' replies.

### 4. Conclusions

Both Scandinavian writers taken into consideration in this article – August Strindberg and Knut Hamsun – were attracted to German culture and had a direct contact with Germany. As we have shown, there are Nietzschean echoes in their works with a view to characters, life philosophy and even names. Paul van Tieghem takes into discussion the term of *crenology*, namely the study of sources, which refers to the writers' biographies, travels, meetings, visual impressions, correspondence with foreign writers, etc., beyond the written texts. From this point of view, although a direct influence of Friedrich Nietzsche may be debatable, the literary salons, the periodicals, the intellectual climate, the correspondence were important factors which could lead to an influence since a literary work is the product of the environment as well.

Moreover, the study of mediators (*mesology* in Van Tieghem's terminology) also bears considerable importance. Thus, the critic Georg Brandes was a very active mediator due to his lectures in Copenhagen from April-May 1888, his *Essay on Aristocratic Radicalism* from August 1889 or his correspondence with the Scandinavian writers. "Brandes was perhaps the first European to give publicity to the thought and philosophy of Nietzsche, at that time a still unrisen sun in the firmament of modern Europe" (Scheffauer 1913: 198). Brandes belonged neither to the receiving countries (Norway and Sweden) nor to the sending country (Germany), but to Denmark (transmitting country). Especially due to his actions, Nietzsche became known in a few years in Scandinavia and the rest of Europe. An author's success in an area, as it happened with Nietzsche, also facilitates his influence on other writers. Besides easily visible similarities, the chronological criterion plays an important role.

So as to conclude, we may say that although it is difficult to distinguish between the precise influence of Nietzsche on Scandinavian literature and the spirit of the age, or to make a clear distinction between temperamental resemblance and direct influence, it is a fact that Nietzsche's work was a stimulus in Scandinavia at the end of the 19$^{th}$ century.

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## Traces of Friedrich Nietzsche's Philosophy in Scandinavian Literature

In the present paper we point out similarities between Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy and the work of some of the most important representatives of Scandinavian literature at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century: August Strindberg and Knut Hamsun. In a critical period in the development of Scandinavian literature, Nietzsche's philosophy reached the peninsula when naturalism was about to come to an end, due to the Danish critic Georg Brandes, who in 1888 delivered a series of 5 lectures about the German philosopher at the University of Copenhagen and to his *1889 Essay on Aristocratic Radicalism*. Ideas related to the Superman, irrationality, will to power, individualism, which characterize Nietzsche's philosophical thinking, can also be traced in Scandinavian literature, even though a direct Nietzschean influence may be debatable.



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