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HANS BRØCHNER

(1886)

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I.

What one seeks from the teachers at a university at nineteen, with the first years of study behind one, is not so much knowledge as the impression of a strong, mature personality. One desires instruction less than the guidance that can be given to the young by a mind well oriented in more than the world of books. One wishes for a teacher who is also a character.

In 1861 there were a number of young men who glowed for philosophy; nearly all of them believed in it. R. Nielsen was sought out by not a few. He always showed interest and goodwill to those who came with questions. But Brøchner expressly offered, in the lecture catalogue, guidance to anyone who wished to study philosophy.
[231] That decided the matter for some to whom a coherent course of inquiry was a serious matter. And soon it was not thirst for knowledge alone that drew us to Brøchner. His personality drew us.

He was 41 years old when we first saw him, heard a series of lectures from him, and were captivated by his elegant and austere figure, the classical profile of his southern head, the great earnest gaze under the arched, somewhat weary lids. Though somewhat worn by the years, he was the noblest male beauty we had ever seen. He was tall and slender, lean and spare. The face was narrow and somewhat hollow, the rich, soft hair blue-black in its smoothness. The large brown eyes had an expression as though they had wept much, as though their gaze had been softened by sorrow. Above them the forehead rose steep and white, as if in two storeys. The Spanish beard did its part to give the impression of something foreign. He did not look like a modern scholar, rather like a thinker from the Italy of the Renaissance, and was indeed, by his own account, of Italian descent.

He looked like a man for whom good living did not exist; he plainly made it a point of honour, in true Spinozist fashion, not to have striven, nor to strive, for earthly

well-being. He lived in a philosophical poverty; for even when he was married his *[232]* salary as docent was only 2,400 kroner. His dress bore the stamp of strict frugality; it was simple and dark, never a spot. His waistcoat was usually buttoned, against the fashion of the day, right up to the neck. He wore the same clothes day in, day out, and they looked the same; he seemed to wear nothing out. His appearance recalled Welhaven's verse on the Polish émigré:

> His face was faded, his dress was coarse,
> His linen was clean and his hands were fine.

It was through the eye, not through the ear, that one felt drawn to him from the first. For his lecturing was anxiously correct, fastidiously groomed in its language, abstract in its train of thought, and answered no question otherwise than by a detailed account of the history of the question and of the answers given to it. It moved forward monotonously, in measured sentences, and had almost no character of speech, though it was delivered freely enough. Brøchner did not have the gift of speech, which is the gift of giving each single listener the impression that the speech is addressed to him in particular. His words often went over our heads; they instructed us without striking home. The lecture was consistent and firm in thought, but it sounded as *[233]* though it were read aloud from an inner book; it did not *live*.

The speaker, on the other hand, lived for us. It was a personality who stood there, as distinguished as he was interesting.

He awakened sympathy; for he looked as though he had once been all passion, while now he was all thought. The sorrowful earnestness of his gaze drew one in, while at the same time something embarrassed and shy that as a rule lay over the speaker's bearing kept one at a distance and raised the question whether one could come close to this man as a human being.

And he commanded respect. The little we young people knew of his fortunes revealed an uncommon independence and strength of character. When, quite a young man, he presented himself for the theological examination, he had shown the openness and the courage to profess his view of the dogmatics of Christianity as mythical. In consequence he had been forbidden to take that examination. He had then thrown himself into the study of philosophy, had translated Strauss, had relied on Feuerbach in a treatise on *Daaben* [Baptism] directed against Martensen, and was so hated as a dangerous man that Christian the Eighth had with his own hand struck his name from the list of applicants for a travel grant. Nonetheless he had (with the help of a *[234]*

brother) lived much abroad, stayed long in Germany, been twice in Italy, and only after 1848 had he again regarded Denmark as a country that had room for him.

The contrast in which his public appearances stood to Rasmus Nielsen's so much livelier, but so far more virtuoso, lecturing struck everyone. It was a contrast that must have corresponded fairly closely to the one that Jouffroy's lectures at the Sorbonne in Paris in the thirties presented to Cousin's — if the following French portrait of the philosopher Jouffroy, which we translate with some omissions but without adding anything whatever, was otherwise true to reality:

"One entered Jouffroy's lecture hall and found there a lean man, somewhat stooped, like all consumptives, with deep-set eyes, a thoughtful and melancholy physiognomy, and an expression over his whole person of weariness, nobility and resignation. He was proud, reserved, often silent, neither forthcoming nor familiar with his students. While Cousin, when set in motion by the storm of enthusiasm and the overflowing
[235] abundance of animal life, talked, communicated himself, poured himself out, explained and persuaded with gestures and the whole oratorical apparatus, no matter whether in a public garden or in his room, no matter where and no matter for whom — Jouffroy was cold and restrained even in the lecture chair. He looked as though he did not know that anyone was there.

His gestures were sparing, his body motionless; one would have thought he was reading an invisible book, occupied solely with understanding it, and wished only to convince himself; he was thinking aloud. No brilliant words, no daring sentences, no effort to amuse, rouse or move; on the contrary, long introductions full of petty divisions and subdivisions, a circumstantial and unceasing examination of the preliminary questions.

When at last he had penetrated into his subject, no decisive or hasty proposition, endless repetitions. When his disciples read through their notes, they found that they had written down the same idea three or four times. And yet from the first day every attentive mind bowed beneath his mind. One discovered at once in him a hidden hearth where an inextinguishable fire burned, more violent and more powerful than
[236] Cousin's dazzling illumination. The less he gave himself away, the more one felt how he burned. These redoubled repetitions showed, in their stubborn attempts, a mind insatiable for the exact expression, unable to rest content with thoughts merely sketched, invincible in the face of effort, persevering in the course of its thoughts until it had reached complete clarity, and at last well acquainted with the narrowness of the way and with the streams of error that flow on both sides of it. One felt reverence

and trust, and when a tremor in the voice, or once in a while an image, signalled an important truth he had found, one saw in this faint sign more emotion and more eloquence than in his rival's brilliant dithyrambs."

It would hardly be possible to give a more apt portrait of the merits of Brøchner's teaching if one set out expressly to do so.

And critical as he was above all by disposition, he shone especially as a polemicist. His offensive war against the theologians, or against Nielsen's masked-theological philosophy, was a model of superior tactics. He would usually begin by setting out with the greatest precision the view he meant to contest, then present point by point the proofs of its untenability, then adduce everything that could conceivably be urged *[237]* from the opponent's side against those proofs, and explain why this supposed defence would count for nothing; then he proved that no defence other than the one adduced could be made at all.

When this was done, he dissolved his opponent's connection of concepts, made him concessions, supposed *per impossibile* that one of the overthrown main points was a firm castle, and showed that even so the most decisive categories contained contradiction upon contradiction. Step by step he went round his opponent's edifice of doctrine, and, well acquainted with its manner of fighting, stopped up every hole through which the opponent might try to escape, until he had him securely caught. Then he would usually end by recapitulating all the contradictions he had shown, and at last closed the critique, held in the most serious tone, with an irony that one could in all truth, and without abuse of the word, call terrible.

II.

A legend went about among the young students that Brøchner, in his young days down in Italy, had been engaged to a very distinguished young lady, a princess or a countess, but that the match was said to have foundered on the difference of religion. *[238]* It gave him a romantic nimbus even now, when he was engaged to a young Danish girl from the provinces, of middle-class origin.

In 1862 he married, and lived in a happy marriage until 1866, when his young wife died after giving birth to her second child. The two had the best of relations, despite a difference in age of a full twenty years, and despite the domain of abstract philosophy, inaccessible to a young woman, round which Brøchner's thoughts, and as a rule his talk too, revolved. His marriage was an idyllic but short episode.

Through a much longer period of his life the memory of that Italian woman, Costanza T., whom he had known and loved in his youth, stood like a star over his daily existence. She had become the dream of his life after the two had been parted in their youth. A very beautiful daguerreotype of her as a young woman always hung in his study. He spoke not infrequently of the original, as of a young lady he had once known, without however going more closely into their relationship.

In 1866 I came to know her personally. She was living then, married to a country-
[239] man of hers, Count Oreste B., in Paris, but really outside Parisian life, in the company only of the Italian, Spanish and South American colony.

Her beauty, but above all her apparent youth, surprised me. I had expected to see an elderly lady, but she seemed no more than some twenty-six or twenty-seven years old, and her figure was as youthful as her face.

One could hardly have had a better recommendation to her than Brøchner's. She could not hear enough about his life and doings. When in our first conversation she asked me whether Brøchner had grown old, and I answered that his hair was still black, she added: And what a black it is! As an intellectual individuality Brøchner did not really exist for her; she had not penetrated into his nature at all, and could not even have made the attempt. She was a young child when he came to know her, and even now, a grown and very delicately feeling woman, she was at bottom childlike. She was unlettered, as Italian women are, extremely natural and unaffected, but reserved none the less, always in a mild and good humour against a background of a certain melancholy. Not exactly happy, but content. She was calm, and by contrast
[240] with her merry, sparkling, worldly and more brilliant, but less beautiful sister, in whose house she was staying, she seemed calmer and quieter still. For several months at that time I saw her almost daily; in 1870 I stayed in her house in the village of Alpignano near Turin, and in 1871 met her again in Rome. She had the deep amiability that is never darkened by a mood; there was the same gentle harmony in her soul as lay over her features.

Costanza was a refined fruit of the luxuriant soil of her native land. She resembled the noble kind of grape that in Italy is called the strawberry grape, which unites the rich sweetness of the grape's juice with the naive aroma of the wild strawberry. She had been badly used in her relation to Brøchner. Her mother, who was as vain as she was bigoted, had, after Brøchner's departure, by constant pressure at home and through the influence of the father confessor, had the engagement to the foreign heretic broken off. Many years later she married a freethinker, as vehement as only

Italy breeds them, far more violent in his pronouncements than Brøchner ever was, and became attached to him with all her heart, without however joining in his convictions. Her husband was one of the most sensible, most upright and most gifted Italians I have known, a hater and despiser of all sham. He valued Costanza as she deserved. *[241]*

She constantly nursed the thought of seeing Brøchner again, and many were the plans made for journeys for him to that end. But the thought of a reunion did not seem to tempt him. He never entered into it, and seemed rather to shun it. It was hardly only the difficulty that long journeys would have meant for him that held him back. Neither the lack of means for them nor his poor health seemed decisive. Probably he shunned the emotion as painful. Or he had grown so used to a life in the memory of his youth and in the dream-relation to Costanza that he feared the disturbing breath of reality. He had to keep her image at the distance of remoteness.

For her, as a woman and a southerner, this romanticism did not exist. She had once loved him; she was still fond of him with all her heart. It would have been a joy to her to see him again, to nurse him, now that he was so gravely ill. She was very anxious that he should never form an unfavourable or false opinion of her. When he married, she broke off the correspondence with him, for fear that his wife might find something strange in it. But then, when the New Year came, she seized the occasion *[242]* to send him her good wishes. Later the correspondence was taken up again, though with long intervals, and Costanza once spent some time in no small disquiet when, during a severe and lengthy illness, she had had to let her husband write for her, and no answer came from Brøchner. She then sent him everlastings and red carnations, which last, according to a remark of Brøchner's, have "a rich meaning" in the Italian language of flowers. In his last years he not infrequently told his small children anecdotes about *Costanza*, whose picture they knew. It was hardly without a thought of this name of hers that in Vilhelm Møller's "Nyt dansk Maanedsskrift" [New Danish Monthly] he signed a treatise with the pseudonym Constans.

III.

The ordinary reader finds all too little of Brøchner's nature as a human being in his writings. The content is too abstract, and the style deters.

By a hair's breadth he would never have become an author at all. He felt no calling to it; he had let his self- criticism consume his urge to produce without resistance, and *[243]* by the age of forty had reached such a point of distaste for all production that he was glad, or believed he was glad, when elsewhere, in Germany for example, thoughts

were put forward that he had thought and written down for his own use long before, but had not given to the press. What does it matter, he would say in such cases, whether it is said by me or by someone else, so long as it comes out.

At 23 he had published a polemical occasional piece on baptism; only a full 14 years later, to qualify for appointment as docent in philosophy at the University, did he write, again as an occasional piece, his little book on Spinoza. Without the persistent pressing of a younger friend it would have stopped there. But now there followed — prompted at first by the polemic against R. Nielsen that others had begun — after 11 years of silence, at short intervals, five large volumes and several smaller works, a whole production written after the author's forty-eighth year, at a time when he was weakened to the utmost by the pulmonary consumption that for ten years broke him down inch by inch, and broke him, as in the aggravated death penalty, limb by limb.

[244] But this very illness, which gave no quarter, lent support to the urging from outside. As long as Brøchner was still well, or at least did not believe himself mortally stricken, he had many a time longed for death. Active as he was, he not only had no fear of death but a kind of love for it. He could speak of it with warmth. It meant for him liberation from personality, reunion with that impersonal principle of the life of the All from which the individual is an emanation; and he was fully content with his self-transformation into a moment in the Godhead's knowledge of itself in its eternal realm of spirit — as he mystically put it.

When death approached with rapid steps, it did not thereby take on any frightening character for him in and of itself; but he strove to live as long as possible, partly so as to lay the foundation of his children's upbringing in the spirit in which he wished them brought up, partly so as to leave behind, by publishing his manuscripts, a testimony of what he had thought and investigated. So his last years became his only literarily productive ones.

But these large books of his reflect only a part of his human nature, and not the most human part. They give an idea of his life of thought and of his pantheistic *[245]* religiosity. They reveal his acuity and his pathos — that is all. And, as I said, the style deters. It is a purely scholastic style, a bookish language with a multitude of German participial constructions, in which everything is *orderly*, but nothing has the spontaneity of life. It reflects all that was stiff, exacting and anxiously punctilious in Brøchner's nature, and gives some idea of a certain pettiness in small things that in him was not ruled out by the breadth of vision of his fundamental outlook. But there

is a quite different style in his letters and in his few last popular pieces. Over the stiff style of the large books there lies a tinge of pedantry that never lay over Brøchner's person. One sees well enough that he was a strict metaphysician, but one does not detect his attitude to conventional morality, his free and broad tolerance, in which something of the man of the world's way of seeing was joined with something of Spinoza's lofty indifference. One cannot sound the depth or measure the strength of his loathing for all theology and all theological views when faced with this official lecture-hall form of his thought, so scientific in its cut and so dispassionate in its expression. Nor does one see how irritable, how ready for a sudden break he was with those companions to whom no deeper sympathy bound him. And who, finally, *[246]* could infer from these works what Brøchner was as a friend! If he was tender and lastingly devoted as a lover, and exemplary as a father who had to take a mother's place with small children, he was in a still higher degree rare as a friend. He, who was reserved to the point of shyness, and in conversation always mocking toward any outburst of youthful enthusiasm, was passionate in friendship. Toward much younger friends he was at once a friend and a father. He thought unceasingly, year in, year out, with a care that passed over no detail, about what he could accomplish for his friend. His friendship was active, a constant activity. And, what is remarkable, it grew steadily in strength from year to year. It rose in inwardness and understanding love and reached — perhaps after fourteen or fifteen years — its greatest height in the year he died.

But this is connected with the fundamental trait, which can likewise be made out only with difficulty through the large books, that Brøchner was in vigorous development almost until the end came.

It did not look so. He had long been a solitary man. He always knew only a few people, and in his last years he had withdrawn more and more from the world; nor *[247]* was he one of those who are much influenced by their surroundings. He had also, relatively early, taken on something of the older man's manner. His impressions of life lay fixed in a stock of anecdotes, to which he often returned without remembering that he had told them before. He had never been a supple mind, and his antipathies, literary and scholarly as well as personal, were of an unshakeable nature. His contempt for a thinker like Schopenhauer went beyond all reasonable measure; his loathing for the form of national self-deification he found in Grundtvig, and for the mixture of dilettantism and unreliability he believed he found in Goldschmidt, knew no bounds. Already in the sixties, when one saw him busy in his garden in Søgade, intent on

developing ever new varieties of pansies, lost in joy at their many different colour patterns, he could give the impression of a man who was finished with human life and had taken refuge from it in a life together with plants.

But that was a semblance. In his later years he underwent a marked metamorphosis. The fighting spirit of his early youth had awakened in him anew. His reserve had
[248] lessened, and his political and social views took on a new colouring. He withdrew completely from people to whom he had earlier been close in political sympathies; between him and his old party comrades, the National Liberals, the most decisive break took place in his mind; he stood far closer to the Socialists than to them.

He had never been inclined to overrate the state of things in Denmark; but in these last years, when his soul felt the urge to stir its wings, he felt more strongly the pressure of smallness and pettiness. In a letter from 1870 he says: "What there is to tell you from here at home is so little and so poor that it is hardly worth mentioning. Our public life goes its trivial parliamentary way, with little deed and much talk, preferably about what is not worth talking about; with small ideas and small personalities, but with great illusions, great vanity and great pettinesses. It is not gratifying, but it must presumably be so, as a passage to a truly free life."

In a letter from 1874 it reads still more painfully, and as if with a melancholy look back: "It is physically unhealthy to live in a small, stuffy room; it is spiritually unhealthy to live in such dwarfish conditions as here at home. Everything shrinks so pitifully; one never receives the fresh impression of what is great; one does not feel
[249] the powerful breath of the life of the world's thought. How easily one sinks down here at home! how easily one takes as the measure of one's striving the pettiness that surrounds one! how easily one stops in the race when one notices that one is some way ahead of the few who were competing for the prize!"

In these years it finally dawned on him that by another manner of writing he could win himself a wider circle of readers. At times he even went so far as to regret that as a young man he had not stayed long enough in France to take in the influence of the French art of exposition — a remark that could not but astonish in his mouth, since until then he had had no feeling at all himself for the shortcomings of the form of his books.

Until then he had, as it were, not dared to write with his whole human nature. His pamphlet against Nielsen was the first symptom of his urge to strike a more natural tone. Yet in it the wittily sharp does not quite fuse with the solemn. In the little treatise on Giordano Bruno there is a clear effort to paint, strong beginnings of a wholly new

manner of narration; and in the posthumous *Erindringer om S. Kierkegaard* [Recollections of S. Kierkegaard] the presentation, in all its unpretentiousness, is superbly sharp in its drawing. Every word here renders reality; even the most insignificant *[250]* thing has life.

He needed only to use the unforced style that he had always had at his disposal in conversation and in letters, but which he had not dared to trust himself to.

I had directed a number of objections against his main work, *Bidrag til Opfattelsen af Filosofiens historiske Udvikling* [Contributions to the Understanding of the Historical Development of Philosophy]. I had pointed out the one-sidedness of a presentation that gave only the longitudinal connection of philosophy, and the inconsistency of Brøchner's sometimes taking the lateral connection into account and sometimes not. When the subject is Greek philosophy, he is willing to see it in its connection with the whole Greek spirit and culture, and holds that only so can it be understood. But when the subject is modern French, German or English philosophy, it is treated as though it led an isolated existence, without relation to the national spirit, without relation to the country's history, poetry and so on. I expressed my admiration for his gift for seizing the main points and presenting the main features of a system; but I asked: Is the system, in all philosophers, what is essential and most important? Is the skeleton everything, the body nothing? Should one not at least beware of stamping interesting, dissimilar philosophical phenomena with the same official school-word, *[251]* when quite different national spirits have found a voice through them? Condillac is usually presented as an appendix to Locke; is there not all the same a yawning gulf between their whole ways of philosophizing? Is there not, on the side of nationality, a still stronger kinship between Descartes and Condillac than there is, as regards the results of their thinking, between Condillac and Locke?

In short, I did not hide that the treatment of the history of philosophy that I had in view as the satisfactory one was a far more concrete and living one than Brøchner's. He answered by pointing to the slowness with which nationality among the more recent peoples has worked its way out of the common world of Latin, and to the extremely complex conditions among the moderns. But if only his book had been written in the style and with the life that shows itself in the following passage from a letter:

"Greek philosophy was genuinely national, and therefore could not put forth *fruitful* shoots in foreign soil. The newer philosophy unfolds on a larger terrain; like the Indian fig tree it throws out branches on all sides, which bend to the ground,

strike new roots and grow with luxuriant growth. That is why the complication
[252] becomes so great, the demonstration of the development so involved, that the great features I wanted to bring out easily become indistinct. Try once to analyse Spinoza from the standpoint of nationality. Try to determine the mixture of the Jewish, the southern European, the Dutch and the universally modern. Try to analyse Kant, with his spiritual kinship with the Germans, his kinship by blood with the Scots, his elective affinity with the French. You will see the task is not easy; I fear it will prove as difficult as calculating the mutual perturbations of three heavenly bodies."

I believe none the less that this was the task that needed solving, and it seems to me that the very way in which Brøchner wrestles with it here shows that, with a somewhat different development of his powers, he would have been able to lay stones for the building he describes as impossible to build.

IV.

About a week before the day of his death (he died on 17 December 1875) Brøchner took leave of his friends. When one day I stepped up to his sickbed, he put a thick packet into my hand — it was all the letters I had written to him over a long run of
[253] years, arranged in order of time and marked on the back of the envelope with the date of sending, the date of receipt and the date on which the letter had been answered. His strong sense of order, and his care that no confidential communication from a friend should fall into strangers' hands, show themselves in this small trait.

He had a short conversation with everyone who came, and pressed his hand, briefly and firmly, in a final farewell.

This last illness, which closed a history of suffering that stretched over more than a decade, was extremely agonizing.

As his thoughts were drawn toward his approaching death, the sick man came to occupy himself with the idea of his funeral. The thought of the Church, to which he had had no relation, and of its priests, who had always been against him, was very painful to him. And in his feeling of having belonged wholly to science and of having had no contact with the clergy, he formulated this wish, which he had laid before the proper authority: to be buried from the vestibule of the University and not from the Nørrebro chapel. He then expressed the wish that a younger friend should speak over him instead of the priest, and named the one he had chosen for it, who had also been willing.

Naturally, after his death there came a refusal with regard to burial from the *[254]* University's Aula, and with it any thought of that friend's speaking on the occasion fell away.

Although Brøchner had the liveliest aversion to a priest's speaking over his coffin — he said on his deathbed: I believe that if such a black man begins to preach over me, I shall rise up out of the coffin and protest — the clerical address was not avoided.

He was buried on 23 December. The clergyman had, it seems, been given the impression that Brøchner had wished for his participation; he intimated as much, and among other things expressed his joy that the deceased and he, though separated by their convictions, had met in mutual respect. The next day a then much-read newspaper announced with aplomb that the priest had spoken at Brøchner's express wish.

For the rest, after his death he was portrayed with precisely the goodwill and warmth needed to show how great the distance was between an *idealist* like him and other, younger freethinkers of a quite different mould. Indeed, the very matter of whether he could rightly be called a freethinker has gradually become an ever greater question.

A question it is not. But it would testify to narrowness of mind if one held *[255]* Brøchner's personality to be exhausted in that barren word. Our opinions are not the most essential or the most original part of our being. Brøchner was by temperament a searcher, whose passionate inquiry was set in motion and driven by a *will of spring* like the one that plays its game in nature when the sap rises in all the plants. As a mind he was a brooder and a man of natural piety, whose faith in the human spirit and whose relation to the spirit of the universe had the character of a religion. He stands in the history of Danish literature as the herald of a new age.