

My Life (*Levned*), Volume I

Excerpt on Hans Brøchner (pp. 129–132)

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For a long time I had pursued my non-juridical studies as best I could without guidance from any teacher. But I had felt the want of such guidance. And when a newly appointed lecturer at the University, Professor H. Brøchner, offered guidance in the study of philosophy to anyone who wished to present themselves at certain specified times, I had felt strongly tempted to avail myself of the offer. I had had reservations about it, for I was reluctant to surrender the least bit of my precious freedom; I enjoyed my retired state, the mystery of my modest student life; but on the other hand I would not be able to venture into Plato and Aristotle without hints from an expert hand about what and how.

I was therefore in great suspense. I had heard Professor Brøchner lecture on psychology; but the delivery had been handled with such anxious care, was so monotonous and alien-sounding, that it could not but intimidate. Only the professor's distinguished beauty attracted, especially his large sorrowful eyes with their lovely gaze, which looked as though they had searched and wept.

[130] Now I resolved to venture up to Brøchner. But I had not the courage to speak of it beforehand to my mother, lest I alarm myself by naming it; so uneasy was I about the step. When the day came that I had appointed for the visit — it was the 2nd of September 1861 — I walked up and down before the house several times before I could bring myself to mount the stairs; I tried endlessly to calculate in advance what the professor would likely say and what I ought then best to reply.

The tall, handsome man, who resembled a Spanish knight, opened the door himself and received kindly the young person who was soon to become his closest student. To my astonishment he knew, the moment he heard my name, which school I had come from and that I had recently become a student. He strongly dissuaded a reading through

of Plato and Aristotle as far too strenuous — said or implied that I ought to be spared the laborious path he had himself traversed, and sketched a study plan for modern philosophy and aesthetics. His bearing inspired confidence and left the dominant impression that he wished to spare the beginner every unnecessary effort. I felt, for all my young energies, nonetheless, as I walked home, a little disappointed at not being to take hold of the history of philosophy from the beginning.

The visit was soon repeated, and quickly there unfolded between teacher and student the most intimate relationship — from the elder’s side a fatherly benevolence such as the younger had not yet known, in which the teacher, both instructing and practically guiding, kept his attention continually fixed on everything that might promote the pupil’s welfare and secure his future; from the younger’s side a relationship of reverence and devotion, a deep gratitude for the care of which he was the object.

I felt, to be sure, now and then before this teacher’s ~~great~~ thoroughness and his ability to grapple with the most difficult thoughts, a painful distrust of my own abilities and my own intellectual power in comparison with his. I also not infrequently felt uncomfortable when something like a crookedness seemed to enter into our relationship — when Brøchner, despite the doubts and objections I raised, always took it as given that I must share his pantheistic fundamental view, without noticing that I was still being tossed about in doubts and groping for a foothold. But the intimate relationship with the mature man had an attraction that the relationship with uncertain or youthfully limited comrades necessarily had to lack: he had a life’s experience behind him, he looked from above down upon a young person’s sympathies and antipathies.

For me, for instance, Ploug’s *Fædrelandet* still stood at that time as Denmark’s intelligent organ, while Bille’s *Dagbladet* was distasteful to me, especially on account of the superficiality and the dismissive tone that characterized the newspaper’s literary criticism. Brøchner, who with mixed benevolence and without making much distinction looked down upon both of these newspapers of the educated public, found in his young pupil’s indignation at the trivial yet useful newspaper only a mark of his disposition. But merely the way in which Brøchner one day remarked with a smile — “I suppose you don’t read *Dagbladet* as a matter of principle” — this made me see in a flash the comical quality in my indignation at a Hjerrild’s articles. My horizon was still narrow enough that conditions in Copenhagen seemed, in and of themselves, significant. I myself considered my horizon broad. One day, when I took stock of my inner accounts, I wrote, as a nineteen-year-old, naïvely: “My good qualities, those that will constitute my personality if I amount to something, are a powerful and glowing enthusiasm, a capable

authority in the service of truth, ~~and~~ a wide horizon and a philosophically educated thinking. These must reconcile one to my lack of humor and ease.”

In essential agreement with Hans Brøchner I first felt myself several years after the acquaintance was formed. But by then a study of Ludwig Feuerbach’s writings had swept me away; for Feuerbach was the first thinker in whom I found the origin of the idea of God in the human mind satisfactorily explained. In Feuerbach I finally encountered an exposition without circumlocution and without the usual heavy formulas of German philosophy, a victorious clarity that had a highly salutary effect on my own manner of thought and gave me security. If for several years I had felt myself considerably to the right of my friend and teacher, there now came a time when I felt myself considerably to the left of him with his mysterious life in the eternal realm of spirit, of which he felt himself a part.